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RAPIER RAPHAEL; or, THE SWORDSMEN of ZACATECAS.

BY MAJOR HENRY B. STODDARD, Ex-Scout,
AUTHOR OF "NECK-TIE NED," "PONY, THE COWBOY," ETC., ETC.



BUT THAT TERRIBLE BLADE WHISTLED, TWISTED, FLASHED IN A HUNDRED DIRECTIONS: IT SEEMED TO MULTIPLY AND
BECOME RAPIER, CUTLASS, SWORD AND FALCHION IN ONE.

Rapier Raphael;

OR,

The Swordsmen of Zacatecas.

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CHAPTER I.

ONE AGAINST THREE.

In the province of Zacatecas, Old Mexico, on the banks of the Rio de Nazas, stands a ruined castle, surmounting a stony hill, one side of which is abrupt and precipitous, bathing its feet in the waters of the river, which rolls, rapid and yellow, at this point.

The castle antedates the memory of man, and was made up of walls crumbling to dust, three or four towers tumbling into ruins, a park overgrown with the brush of a hundred years' growth, ditches half-filled with mud.

During windy nights the rusty wind-vane creaked in a lugubrious manner, while the owls, fit companions of the doleful surroundings, flitted on silent wings in and out of the open casements, the shutters of which scarce hung by one hinge.

In the years 1863 to 1867, the surrounding country was swarming with French and Austrian troops, while in the unsettled state of the country the Mesquitos, the Gachupines, the Zambos and the Chinos roamed almost at will, robbing and plundering whatever of traveler or dwelling they encountered.

For, influenced by Louis Napoleon, Maximilian of Austria had become inflated with the idea that he could win a crown, and had invaded the country with that intention.

How fruitless his efforts were, is shown by the shots that rung out on the plains of Queretaro, by the long and never-ceasing insanity of Carlotta, the would-be emperor's wife.

During the years mentioned, the almost ruined castle was inhabited by a band of youths, six in number, who, leaving the United States in 1862, being too young to enter the army during the great Civil War, had gone to Mexico to work one of the old silver mines with which that country abounds.

This mine had been the property of Mr. Raphael Douglass, who at his death had bequeathed it to the sole surviving member of his family, his son, Raphael, junior.

The latter, barely fifteen when he reached Mexico, had been recalled from Europe by his father's death.

The boy Raphael had been sent abroad while yet a mere child, and, educated at one of the finest schools in Switzerland, possessed a thorough knowledge of both French and German, besides being a perfect master of that difficult science—fencing.

Young as he was, there lay concealed beneath his white skin, muscles and sinews of steel, and when he stood on guard, with his rapier lightly yet firmly grasped, the point at the height of his eye, his body resting solidly on his left foot, he was considered by both the masters and pupils of the school, as well as by the officers of the garrison in the town, well-nigh impregnable.

And Rapier Raphael, as he was called from his proficiency with his favorite weapon, had instructed his five comrades in the art of fencing with so much diligence that this, added to the interest that they took in the exercise, made them nearly as much the masters of the weapon they favored as was their instructor himself.

When, back to back they stood, with their swords hissing, whistling, bending in the air, and darting out their needle-like points in seemingly twenty different directions at once, a hollow-square of bayonets was easier to break through.

On the evening on which the reader is introduced to Mount Desert, as Raphael had named his home, calling it after the island off the coast of Maine where he was born, a number of men, evidently French and Austrian officers, were gathered in front of the gate, or rather door which gave entrance to the castle yard.

This door, strongly made of massive oak, and crossed in every direction by bars of iron and heavily studded with iron bolts, was well-nigh impregnable unless the attacking party was armed with battering-rams or the more modern artillery.

The officers, unacquainted as they were with the ruined mansion and its inmates, and receiving no response to their oft-repeated summons, became more and more impatient as the door remained closed and no one appeared in answer to their knocks.

Finally one of the number who seemed to be the highest in authority, turned to a young officer at his right and spoke:

"Maurigot, my friend, look about and see if you can not find some means of climbing this accursed wall. We cannot stay here all night, and as the house seems deserted, we will, forsooth, take possession. You will probably be able to open the door from the inside. Go, and good luck go with you."

By an oversight which did not long remain unpunished, the man of all work retained by Raphael to attend to the garden and horses, had left a ladder leaning against a tree near by, he having used it to trim the decaying branches of an ancient oak, which threatened to fall and do serious injury to the wall.

Maurigot's eye fell on this ladder, and, dismounting from his horse, he quickly procured the ladder, and leaning it against the wall was soon at the top, peering into the darkness of the garden and shrubbery below.

The massive pile of the ruined castle rose dark and stern against the sky a short distance back, but not a single ray of light broke from its somber exterior.

All was mysterious and gloomy, yet the young Frenchman was made of the stuff that produces heroes; so, carefully straddling the coping, that he might avoid the bits of broken glass which protected it, giving a last look he turned to his companions and leaning over said:

"Not a sign of life, either in house or park. Not even a dog. If the cote contains a pigeon the bird is asleep!"

"Well then," said he who seemed to be the leader, "leap into the park and open the door. It's getting on toward supper time and I am ravenous!"

Maurigot disappeared, and the others could hear him as he crashed through a bush and landed on the turf inside.

The fall was a hard one and the young officer was for a moment stunned, and remained for an instant immovable.

"Well, by my faith, a rude shock," he muttered. "But I will open the door, and perhaps, the next time some one else will be sent ahead!"

And stepping to the door he examined its fastenings.

These consisted of a heavy iron bar, held in its socket by a large padlock, which rendered it immovable.

"Heuh!" grunted Maurigot, "after playing acrobat must I now become a lock-smith? Well, here goes!" and, having a knife in his belt, he drew it and, forcing the point of the blade into the padlock, tried to break it open.

"For the honor of Bacchus, hurry!" cried one of the officers from the outside; "do you want us to starve?"

But Maurigot had no time to answer him; at that moment he received a terrible blow on top of his head.

This crash, which seemed to descend direct from heaven, was the stroke from the handle of a sword, under which the light fatigue-cap of the officer crushed as if it were an egg-shell, while the Frenchman half-turned, completely stunned for the moment—so stunned, in fact, that no voice was left him to call for help.

A young man stood in front of him, who thrust in his face the point of his naked sword, seeing which, Maurigot, stepping back a pace and leaning against the door, drew his rapier.

"You hound!" spoke out a clear and vibrating voice, "as sure as my name is Raphael Douglass, as sure as you are nothing but a midnight marauder, I am going to spit you to that door!"

Dazed as he was, Maurigot was not exactly in a condition to do himself entire justice, and calling on his comrades to come to his aid, he crossed swords more feebly than was his wont.

On the other side of the wall, the officers awaiting the opening of the door could hear the click and ring of the steel blades as they clashed against each other.

"Gentlemen," said their leader, "Maurigot has fallen into an ambush. What shall we do?"

An Austrian, named Schombrun, brave as most of his countrymen are, and always willing to assist a companion, answered for his comrades:

"Let us to his rescue! It will make us forget our hunger for a moment, and I, for one, do not propose to leave behind us the shelter of these walls, for you see, gentlemen," and as he pointed to the west a gleam of lightning split the heavens from zenith to horizon.

In speaking these last words he was half-way up the ladder.

At this time Raphael and Maurigot were fencing with all the fury of deadly enemies, and twice the sword of the former had scraped the breast of the Frenchman and brought blood.

But Maurigot, who by this time had recovered his entire senses, being one of the best swordsmen of his regiment, gave Raphael about all that he could attend to, and finally, making a feint, half-dropped to the ground, glided under Raphael's arm, and tried to plant his knife, which he still held in his left hand, in the young American's side.

But the boy, quick as the lightning, lifted his arm and then let it fall, and a second stroke of the handle of his sword fell on the doomed head of the Frenchman; he let both sword and knife drop, and fell, insensible on the ground.

But at the same time Schombrun appeared on top of the wall and prepared to leap to the scene of combat.

"Ah! ah!" said Raphael, "so there were two of them!" But as the Austrian leaped, another figure took his place, and the boy continued, falling into that rather fantastic form of expression which contact with foreigners had taught him.

"By the honored ashes of my father, it fairly rains officers, to-night! Well, good enough! I'll try and play sun, awhile, and stop this shower!" and thus talking to himself, the boy backed up against the door, and threw himself into position with all the assurance that his many victories abroad had given him.

Schombrun was brave, as has been said, but of that bravery a little blind, a little brutal, a little rash that is characteristic of the race to which he belonged, and as serious as a mule in a cornfield, he advanced on Raphael, and arriving within reach, threw himself on his adversary with the blind fury of a wild boar that turns on the pursuing hounds, and crossed his sword with him impetuously.

"As for you, my noble friend from the Danube," laughed the boy as twisting his steel like a snake he threw the rapier of the Austrian, with a jerk, ten paces away, into a small pond that was there

"you do not know the first principles of the noble art of fencing. Now for the other!"

And turning, he faced the third intruder, who was no other than the leader who had first sent Maurigot to his defeat.

In a few moments Raphael found that up to this time all of his fencing bouts had been child's play compared to his present experience, for never had he encountered an opponent who so excelled.

For five minutes or more it was nip and tuck, and neither of the two swordsmen seemed to be able to gain any superiority over the other, and but for a slight advantage gained by Raphael, through an accidental stumble of the other, caused by his foot catching in a projecting root, the result might have been different.

But as he stumbled the rapier carried by the boy was glancing like a flash toward the Frenchman's right side, and as he, thrown off his balance, was unable to parry, the steel slid into his shoulder, passing through up to the hilt, and the officer, fainting from the excruciating pain, fell heavily to the sword.

But the Austrian had meantime stoien behind Raphael, and throwing his arms around him, while his attention was distracted by the fallen Frenchman, held him as in a vise; for Schombrun was built in a huge mold and was a perfect giant alongside the slim American.

And so the boy found himself perfectly powerless and helpless, the more so that by this time the three officers who had remained outside had entered the park, and, running to the Austrian's assistance, aided him in binding his prisoner.

Then as their leader appeared to be seriously if not dangerously wounded, they decided to push on to their camp, where the services of a surgeon could be obtained.

So two long poles being procured and fastened to the stirrups of two saddles, a comfortable litter was quickly made by means of a large military cloak, and the wounded man being placed therein, the cavalcade prepared to set out.

Raphael was to walk, his hands being securely tied, and was placed in charge of Maurigot, who had recovered from the effects of Raphael's second blow, except that his head ached terribly.

The gate was thrown open, and Schombrun, in the lead, was about to pass out, when a tall and slender horseman barred his passage and a clear, quiet voice challenged the party.

The Austrian, turning to his comrades, said a few words of warning and then drawing his sword, rode down on the new arrival like a thunderbolt.

As surely as his enormous Norman horse had struck the slight Andalusian animal ridden by the stranger, the shock would have been fatal, but the latter bounded out of the way as lightly as a gazelle, while the Austrian, unable to check his steed immediately received a sword-thrust in the back which made him roar like a wounded bull.

Turning he rode back to his opponent, who awaited him with the utmost sang-froid.

CHAPTER II.

FIVE AGAINST ONE.

But as the huge Austrian rode down upon him, the unknown, touched his mare lightly in the flank with his spur, which caused her to leap forward to the encounter, and met the Austrian half-way.

And as he rode down upon Schombrun, the lightning which leaps in zig-zag across the torn clouds, the viper which coils itself while hissing, give but an imperfect simile of the manner in which the sword of the new-comer acted.

With an upper cut to the right he placed officer Schombrun completely out of the combat for a few moments, as the razor-like edge caught him just over the eyes, while the stream of blood which gushed from the gaping wound, blinded him completely.

And then turning, with the white brightness of his sword dimmed with the crimson fluid, he leaped like the mountain torrent down upon his remaining adversaries.

And as the light hoof-beats of his nervous Spanish mare barely crushed the green grass that carpeted the park, he fell like an avalanche, his sword raised high, his eye aflame, in the middle of the quartette arrayed against him.

With a lightning-like twist of his arm and wrist, he slashed the ear off of the side of Maurigot's head, sinking the steel deep into the flesh and muscles of the French officer's shoulder, and disabling him for weeks to come.

Before the others had recovered from their surprise each of them had received a more or less serious wound in the chest and side; it seemed as if Satan himself had taken a hand in Raphael's rescue.

However, Schombrun having tied his handkerchief about his forehead and thus checked the flow of blood, and the others having recovered from their surprise, and perceived that there was but a single swordsman opposed to them, they formed in line and essayed to give him battle.

But that terrible blade whistled, twisted, flashed in a hundred directions; it seemed to multiply and become rapier, cutlass, sword and falchion in one, while his nervous little mare, which flashed fire from eye and steam from nostril, seemed equally interested in the combat, rushing against the other horses, rearing and striking out viciously with her fore-legs.

Raphael's rescuer had not received a single scratch, while his opponents were in a most pitiful state and half helpless from the superstitious fear that overcame them.

"Save yourselves!" cried one of them. "It is Beelzebub in person, and not a human being that we are fighting with!" and putting spurs to their

horses they fled across the plain as if they really believed that the Evil Spirit was after them.

In a few moments the unknown remained alone with Raphael and the two wounded men.

Paying no attention to the latter the horseman rode up to Raphael, and stooping over and using his sword, still smoking with the blood that stained it, cut the cords that bound the boy's hands, and left him free.

Raphael, lifting his hat courteously bowed and thanked the unknown for the assistance rendered, then noticing for the first time that his rescuer wore a mask.

"How can I repay you, sir, for your assistance?" began the American, when a gesture from the rider stopped him.

"No thanks are needed, yet I came to ask your aid. If chance has so favored me that I have been able to aid you, so much the better. Is your house empty?"

"For the moment only," replied the lad. "My companions will return within the hour. In the mean time will you enter and partake of our rude fare? It may be coarse, yet will be so freely given that it may be palatable. And these men must be attended to."

And, followed by the stranger, Raphael led the way to the house, the horses bearing the litter and the wounded Maurigot following instinctively.

Within a short time the two sufferers were comfortably couched and their pains allayed by a rude sort of surgery displayed by the stranger, aided by some healing ointments that Raphael kept constantly on hand.

Not many hours after the unexpected rescue of Raphael, the door of the park again opened and a party of horsemen rode out onto the plain.

They were of the number of seven, and their leader, recognizable by his mask, which covered all the upper portion of his face above his mouth, could readily be distinguished as the wonderful swordsman who had wrought such havoc with the rapier.

The six who followed him were Raphael and his five comrades, who had returned to the castle from the mines a short time after Raphael and the stranger had seated themselves at table.

Each of the six lads was armed with a long rapier which slapped against his left thigh as he rode, and a revolver, for in those days and times and districts, most of the encounters which took place between the officers on either side were settled with swords after the most approved style of dueling, handed down from the glorious days of yore.

Riding at a rapid pace the little band were not long in reaching the outskirts of the village of Durango, and here they halted, four of the lads being left with the horses, while the stranger, Raphael and the lad who might be called his first lieutenant, Rob Stanhope, proceeded quietly down through the back part of the village to a dark and noisome street one side of which gave upon the river, while the other was bordered with low, squat houses of evil appearance.

But few lights shone from any of them, and wherever a ray appeared, over the door or window through which it shone was sure to be seen hanging the swining sign indicative of liquor for sale.

And in these places the thieves, the robbers, the murderers—all of the criminal horde of the good village of Durango were wont to assemble and drink *pulque*, the most villainous decoction that ever made a man rob his own trunk.

The three arrived in front of one of these dives, over the door of which hung a greasy-looking red lantern, when suddenly from the interior arose a perfect pandemonium of shrieks, cries, howls and oaths, a regular infernal tumult.

Behind the windows, of painted glass, could be seen shadows passing from time to time, although no one could be distinguished through the opaque panes.

And then the cries continued, some despairing, others joyous, mingled with oaths, blasphemies and drunken songs. In the midst of these vociferations, a woman's voice, supplicating and full of agony, could be heard, rising above the clamor, and plainly distinct to those outside.

The three stopped and listened, their blood chilled by the agonizing cries of the despairing creature inside.

Raphael, at length could listen no longer and as the cry: "Help! help!" came to his ears with redoubled force, he turned to the masked man, whom he recognized as his temporary leader and spoke to him.

"Sir, is your business so urgent that it will not admit of our stopping for an instant and rescuing this poor creature from her tortures, whatever they are?"

The unknown shrugged his shoulders and then, without a word, turned to the door and struck it three thundering blows with the handle of his sword.

In a moment one of the windows close by opened, and a villainous-looking face appeared and demanded:

"Who is there?"

"Open instantly," returned the stranger, "or, although 'tis an insult to my good sword, I'll pin you like a blue-bottle to the wall when we enter!"

An oath was the only response, and the window was closed.

Raphael and Rob never understood exactly how it was done; but the stranger stepped back, measured the distance with his eye, and as he leaped, the door flew in as if struck by a twenty-inch shell.

In a moment the three were inside, and a strange and terrible picture presented itself to them.

A post, supporting the floor above, rose from near

the fire-place, wherein an ardent fire was blazing, and tied to this post in a sitting position was a young and beautiful girl.

Kneeling beside her with an iron bar in her hand, the bar being evidently used as a poker, knelt an ancient hag, approaching the red-hot end of the iron to the bare soles of the young girl's bare feet, which were already seared and scorched by the contact of the metal.

At a table near by three men were seated, drinking, singing and blaspheming; while if the poor girl who was being tortured cried louder than usual, one of them threw a glass of *pulque* in her face, saying:

"Shut up, and don't destroy the harmony!"

The fumes of the sickening decoction they were drinking, the vile odor of the villainous tobacco they smoked mingled with the horrible stench of burning flesh, all combined to make up a fit atmosphere to surround the scoundrels in their crimes.

As the three passers-by burst into the room there was a sudden silence, which lasted several seconds, when suddenly the three men rose to their feet, overturned the table and barricaded themselves behind it.

One of them, a perfect giant, and the same who had spoken to them out of the window, having no other arm, reached back and secured the iron bar, until now used as an instrument of torture.

His two companions, drawing each a long and vicious-looking knife from his belt, ranged themselves alongside him.

As his eye fell on the young girl who was undergoing this cruel torture, the unknown, who still wore his mysterious mask, uttered a piercing cry, and, drawing his sword, at one bound cleared the overturned table and leaped toward the fire.

The hag, deprived of the poker, and evidently fearing that her prey would escape, sprang upon the poor child, and grasping her delicate throat in her sinewy hands, buried her thumbs therein to strangle her.

As the mask reached her side, his sword was raised high in the air, and descended, whistling.

Yet it did not kill.

The unknown, doubtless remembering her sex at that moment, changed it in mid-air, and instead of cutting deep into the flesh, she received a blow with the flat of the weapon which raised a welt an inch wide, and caused her to release the girl on the instant.

As the man stooped to raise the fainting girl and cut her bonds, the giant turning hurled the heavy iron bar he held straight at the other's head; but the intended victim avoided the blow by a side motion, and the bar, striking the wall, fell with a loud clang harmlessly to the floor.

And this was the last act of his vicious life, for as an echo to the clang of the falling bar, came the report of Raphael's pistol, and the giant, vomiting a horrible blasphemy, together with a torrent of blood, fell to the floor in his death-agony, shot through and through the body.

And then clearing the fortification that had been made of the table, Raphael and Rob attacked the two men behind it, sword in hand.

The contest was a short one, and the two men, forced to retreat to the side of the room, reached the wall, fought desperately for a moment, and then, stuck through and through the body, fell forward dead, almost before the two lads could withdraw their swords.

The aspect of things was completely reversed, and of the late occupants of the hall but two remained living—the victim and her tormentor.

The woman who had been so cruel, now half-crazy from the pain caused by the blow of the flat of the sword, was now crouched against the wall, whence she regarded the three friends with savage glances, like a wild beast which at length turns upon hunter and dogs.

The measures taken by the stranger had well-nigh restored the fainting girl, when, catching sight of her late tormentor, she gave way to a second and much more severe fainting fit than the previous one.

Noticing this, Raphael catching the parchment-faced old woman by the shoulders, led her to the door, and there, pushing her into the street, turned her loose to find the fate that would certainly overtake her in the end, saying:

"Go hunt the gallows that surely awaits thee!"

And then, casting a last glance of disgust at the horrible picture presented by the dead bodies and the other surroundings of the drinking room, the three took up their departure, accompanying the young girl, tenderly carried in a chair.

"Gentlemen," said the stranger, "this is my daughter!"

CHAPTER III.

AN IMPORTANT CAPTURE.

At this announcement, the two lads removed their caps and bowed low to the young girl that they were assisting in carrying, and who smiled upon them both with that sad smile of mingled pleasure and pain, which denotes internal suffering.

And then in her soft and musical voice, she spoke to them in the melodious Spanish which was her native tongue, thanking them for their aid both in her own and her father's name.

Proceeding down the street, the quartette soon arrived at an inn of modest appearance, which promised clean beds and palatable food, and at the door of this inn the stranger knocked, his summons being quickly answered.

A few moments after, the little party were comfortably installed in a pleasant room, and cooling

lotions having been applied to the feet of the suffering girl, she soon became more comfortable, and able to inform the two lads of the reason for her being a prisoner, and being put to the torture.

"The bandits in whose hands you found me," she began, addressing herself more particularly to Raphael, "are mercenaries, and in the pay of Maximilian, although they are Mexicans."

"A price is set on my father's head by the Austrians and the French, and these three men, who to-night expiated their crimes, made an attack on my home, thinking to find my father there."

"He had, however, just left the house, and I was there alone," and the girl gave a shudder at the recollection of her thoughts, as these horrible creatures found her defenseless.

"They abducted me, thinking to make me by threats or torture, reveal my father's whereabouts."

"But this I refused to do, and the Blessed Virgin alone knows what would have been the result had you not arrived so opportunely!"

And as she ceased speaking, the lovely girl cast another look of gratitude at the two boys, and taking her father's hand, kissed it gratefully.

But while her lips were still pressing the hand she had raised, the door burst open, and a file of French soldiers, headed by an officer in full uniform, entered the room, and remained, with finger on trigger, at a "ready."

The officer, removing his cap with that innate politeness peculiar to the French, advanced toward the center of the room, and bowing, made known his errand.

"General Juarez, I have orders to arrest you, wherever found, and remove you to the citadel, there to await your trial and punishment for having caused several of our French and Austrian officers to be shot."

"Will you follow me, or must I use force?"

It seemed useless to resist, and Juarez, for he it was who was disguised with the mask, merely requested that time he allowed him to see that his daughter was comfortably settled.

This was readily granted as soon as the cruelty practiced on her had been explained, the Frenchman displaying much righteous indignation and anger.

In the mean time but little attention was paid to the two American lads, who, rising, strolled to the window, which was not far from the ground.

When within reaching distance they leaped as by one common impulse, and arrived safe at the pavement below, and hid in the darkness around the corner of the house.

Once there Raphael, placing to his lips a peculiarly-shaped whistle, blew a long, low-pitched blast which resounded far down the street, and seemed to bring an echo after it.

But this apparent echo was but the answer to his signal, and in a moment his four comrades came galloping down the street to meet him.

The French officer had descended and barred the door at once after the escape of the two friends, fearing that they would give the alarm and arouse the inhabitants, who would surely flock to the rescue of their beloved General Juarez.

The garrison was small, and strict orders had been given to do their utmost to preserve the peace, and under no circumstances to have recourse to powder, but to use bayonet or rapier solely if needs must.

This will explain certain gun-shots that appear to be lacking, and which the soldiers were aching to fire, being restrained solely by the strict commands they had received.

Immediately upon the arrival of the rest of his band, Raphael explained the situation to them, well knowing that the Americans would on this occasion side with the Mexicans against those who were trying to establish an empire on the free soil of North America.

Two of the lads had found an ax and a heavy iron bar, the use of which was not apparent, and with them began an attempt to batter down the door.

Leading his horse to below the window of the room where Juarez was confined, Raphael, standing on the saddle, leaned against the house, while Rob, who was the lighter of the two, climbing on his shoulders, tried to reach the sill.

But as he was drawing himself up one of the soldiers struck him such a blow on the head with the stock of his gun, that Robert trembled, turned half-around, and fell to the ground with such force that Raphael thought him dead.

But the young leader was not discouraged.

He wore, that night, beneath his cap, a skull-cap of steel, lined with cotton and wool, that he had bought in France, and this sort of helmet was strong enough to support almost any blow that it might receive.

The door still resisting the blows of ax and bar, he called to one of his friends, who immediately placed himself on the saddle, standing, and allowed Raphael to climb on his shoulders to the window.

As he reached the sill a similar blow to the one which had laid Rob low descended on his head, but, thanks to the excellent quality of his steel cap, he escaped unhurt.

He wavered for a moment from the crushing force of the blow, but did not fall, and giving a vigorous leap, landed in the room, burying his sword to the hilt in the breast of the astonished soldier, who could not understand how a man could receive the blow he had dealt and live.

As Raphael sprang into the room he found himself confronted by three men, armed with drawn swords. Juarez and his daughter had disappeared, as well as the young officer and the rest of the soldiers.

"Surrender, sir," said one of the soldiers, evident-

ly a sergeant, judging from the stripes on his sleeve. "Three against one is too many."

"Ah, you think so," laughed Raphael. "You do not know that I am called Rapier Raphael, or the reason therefor."

And, backing against the wall, he whirled his sword around, making it hiss defiantly in the air.

The combat lasted five minutes, and Raphael received three wounds and gave eight, one of his adversaries being wounded in the arm, another in the shoulder, the third in the throat, these being also touched in various other places.

But Raphael was alone and had been deeply wounded in the chest by the sergeant, and his shirt was all crimson, while the blood flowed in torrents.

But for this Raphael cared little, and after acting for a moment on the defensive, suddenly he assumed the offensive.

"Ah, gentlemen," he cried, rushing on his adversaries, "I'll show you how well I deserve my name of Rapier Raphael!" and despite the bravery and advantage of the three soldiers they hesitated a moment and each stepped back a pace.

Raphael had become a perfect lion, and his eyes as well as his sword gave out sparks of fire, and suddenly he lunged out at the sergeant, who, in turn had retreated to the wall.

Despite the well intended parry, the glittering steel crept under the guard, and, pierced through and through, the soldier remained standing, for the sword had entered so deeply into the planks behind him, that Raphael, strive as he might, was unable to withdraw it.

For a moment he gave himself up for lost, but just then the wounded sergeant yielding up the ghost, his sword dropped from his nerveless hand, and had scarcely clanged to the floor before it had been grasped by Raphael, and he was again on guard.

The fray lasted but a few moments longer, for one of the soldiers was quickly disarmed, while the other was so severely wounded that he was unable to stand, and Raphael, securing their swords, went to the window to see what was going on there, and why no assistance had reached him.

The matter was quickly understood when he saw his four comrades fighting with fury against an equal number of soldiers, while three or four of the latter lay bleeding in the street.

It was a beautiful moonlight night, and everything could be seen as distinctly as by day, and Raphael, seating himself on the sill awaited the result calmly.

He had but few fears for the outcome, knowing, as he did, how thoroughly trained his companions were and how perfectly familiar with their weapons.

And the conclusion was as he had expected it would be.

In a few minutes more the Americans had the field to themselves, all of their opponents who were not dead or seriously wounded having taken to flight.

Quietly descending to the street by the staircase, and unbarring the front door, Raphael rejoined his companions, and as there seemed no hope of rescuing Juarez, counseled immediate return to their home, as a large force would invariably be sent from the garrison after them.

This was certainly the best plan, and quickly adopted; Rob, who was still suffering from the blow he had received, being assisted to mount and to ride slowly home.

Arrived there, Raphael proceeded to the room where the two wounded French officers were, and finding them much improved, congratulated them warmly, then continued:

"Gentlemen, I regret to inform you that for the present, at least, you are my prisoners. As soon as circumstances alter somewhat I shall be glad to release you."

"But we had a little difficulty at Durango, and I shall have to hold you as hostages until we see our way clear."

"In the mean time, everything that I possess is at your disposal—except freedom—and I shall try and make your captivity as light as possible."

And Raphael then retired to his own room, to obtain some much needed rest, and to have his wounds attended to.

While Raphael and his band were seeking to gain entrance into the little inn at Durango, the officer bearing the tramp of horses' feet, as Raphael's friends arrived, and fearing an attempted rescue, hurried Juarez and his daughter out of the house by the back entrance, and leaving only three men in the room he vacated, took the rest with him as an escort.

Arrived near the citadel where the troops were garrisoned, he sent back some of the soldiers to find out what had happened, and these were the ones Raphael had seen in combat with his companions.

Meantime Juarez was confined in one of the upper rooms of the fortress and his daughter given free leave to depart whenever she might desire.

She was made to swear that she would not reveal her father's whereabouts to any of the Mexican troops, or to any one who might betray it, and this oath being taken, was, after bidding her father adieu, possibly never to see him alive again, conducted to the door of the citadel, and then after she had declined an escort, set out alone on her way.

As she had leaned on her father's neck, sobbing out her fears, he had found opportunity to whisper a word to her which had given her some little hope.

That word was "Americans!"

As she recollected their brave actions of that evening she felt confident that if anything could be done toward saving her father, these lads would do it, and painful as her feet were, she set out to walk

as rapidly as possible until she could procure a horse.

This she was not long in finding, and soon was riding rapidly over the plains in the direction of Mount Desert, the ancient castle where the Rapiers had made their home and where they lived, unmolested, so much were they feared and respected by all around.

It was not a very long ride from Durango to Mount Desert, and the distance was soon traversed by Donna Pachucha, who urged her steed to its fastest gait, so anxious was she to consult with the possible saviors of her father.

The watchfulness of the garrison was exemplified the moment she drew in sight of the castle, for a horseman rode out at full speed and came toward her, each being distinctly visible to the other in the bright moonlight.

The young American on guard was a stranger to the Mexican girl, but a few words explained who she was and what her errand, and she was quickly conducted to the usual reception-room and requested to wait until Raphael could be informed of her arrival.

To her soon came the wife of the old man-of-all-work, desiring to know what service she could render, and soon after a heavier step was heard, and Raphael, bowing low entered the room, looking somewhat pale and tired and requested to be informed as to her commands.

CHAPTER IV.

AN HEREDITARY MESSENGER.

RAPHAEL was soon in possession of all the facts relating to Juarez's capture and confinement in the citadel and the conversation then turned on the best manner of effecting his release.

It was useless to think of attacking the fortress, for the force at the boy's disposal would not admit of this and, bound as the girl was by her oath, no Mexican troops could be asked for from any of the camps.

But as the conversation continued an idea began to germinate in the lad's mind and aided by a few suggestions from the bright girl who was talking to him, finally took deep root and sprung into full life and being.

But it was absolutely necessary to communicate with Juarez, to bid him be of good cheer, and not to despair, even though the day of execution should arrive, and no sign have been made that his friends were on the alert.

Raphael mentioned this necessity and added that he despaired of finding any means of communication that would remain undiscovered.

On receiving this announcement Donna Pachucha smiled with an air that seemed to say: "Leave such matters to a woman's wit," and turning to the boy, removed her rosary from about her neck, where, like most devout Catholics, she wore it at all times, handed it to him and asked him to examine it carefully and thoroughly.

He could discover nothing, and she then told him its history, with which her father was perfectly familiar.

This rosary, which the girl wore about her neck, and which seemed so innocent, had a terrible and a criminal history, and had descended from father to son, and from him to daughter from the XVth century—the century of Catherine di Medicis—second Lucretia Borgia of Italy.

Rene, the Florentine, favorite of Catherine afterwards, at one time kept a perfumer's establishment, and had already acquired considerable skill and reputation as a poisoner of respectable merit.

Into his store one day entered a monk—or a pretended one—so completely hidden by his hood, that it was impossible to distinguish one feature from another, and thus spoke:

"Have the walls ears here?"

"For me alone," replied Rene.

"Well, it is to you I wish to speak—close the door."

The monk spoke with a certain accent of authority which did not fail to impress the Florentine. Besides he opened his robe, as if by accident, and Rene saw the butts of two pistols and the handle of a poniard glisten in his belt.

"What does your holiness wish?" he asked, humbly.

"Close the door!" repeated the monk, and Rene obeyed.

Upon this the monk drew from the pocket of his robe, a rosary with large beads, the same one which Donna Pachucha had now in her possession.

"Here is," said he, "a rosary which it is desired should become, some day, the property of a certain religious person."

"And you need a go-between?"

"One moment, if you please," and through the opening of the hood Rene caught a glance that sparkled as with an infernal light. And the monk continued:

"It is desired that this rosary be soaked with some sort of chemical, the effect of which would be—" and he stopped; but the Florentine, understood instantly and completed the interrupted phrase:

"A chemical," said he, "which would kill—in time."

"Alas!" sighed the monk, "this person has enormous wealth from which no one derives any benefit whatever."

"Indeed!"

"And of which the heirs are in great need!" and speaking thus the monk placed a huge sack of strong leather, and very heavy, on the table before Rene.

The sack was tied up tightly, but the leather was

worn here and there and Rene could see that it was full of gold, and in turn he addressed the monk.

"Do you wish that the result should be long deferred, or—well, are you in a hurry?"

"Oh, the matter can rest a month!"

Rene examined the rosary and discovered that the beads were hollow. "One of them unscrews," said the monk.

"And which?"

"Guess," and Rene examined them one after the other but could discover nothing, and ended the search by saying: "It is impossible that it should be so!"

"I will prove the contrary," said the monk. "Count the beads through your fingers, slipping one after the other, commencing with the one to which the cross is attached."

"Well?"

"Stop at the number 47," and Rene stopped there.

"Now, take the bead that you have in your fingers, turn each of the ovoid extremities in contrary directions."

Rene obeyed and divided the grain in two parts, leaving exposed in one of them a cavity large enough to contain anything the size of a dried pea.

"One question," said he to the monk. "Do you suppose that it would be possible to pierce this bead with a fine needle?"

"Nothing easier."

Rene left the monk for a short time, entered his laboratory where he remained perhaps ten minutes and then returned and said:

"The hollow bead is filled with an almost imperceptible powder which the person wearing the rosary will breathe in, little by little, if a hole is made with a needle as I suggested."

"And—this—powder?"

"Will bring about, in fifteen or twenty days, the happy result that the heirs so earnestly pray for."

"I count on your word, Rene," said the monk, "and if your prediction is fulfilled, you will be amply recompensed."

"Ah!" hazarded the Florentine, "you are a monk of high estate! You do things generously!"

"In one month, if your powder has any virtue, you will hear from me," continued the monk.

Rene bowed.

"In one month, day for day—hour for hour!" and the monk departed with the rosary.

And day for day, hour for hour, one month afterward, as he had promised, the monk returned and said:

"Rene, your powder was efficacious, and I am come to keep my promise," and he placed on the table a second bag, filled to overflowing with gold, and with no further word he left.

Such was the history of the rosary that was related to Raphael, when the young Mexican explained that it had come down to her through various family ramifications.

The hollow bead was shown, and it was added that a note could be concealed therein, and the rosary sent to console her father during his last hours on earth, should he be condemned to death.

It would pass without suspicion, but her father, being familiar with its secret, would wait until alone, and then read the note.

The plan was simplicity itself, and after confiding the brave girl to the care of the old woman who served as cook, Raphael bade her good-night, and they separated, to carry out the plans already matured, on the morrow.

And in the morning, after further deliberation, the old servant was sent to the citadel, with the rosary and a note that read somewhat as follows—the note being unsealed that the commander of the fortress might read it, and thus suspect no plot:

"MY DEAREST FATHER:—I am convinced that death is to be your portion—death for having put others to death under guise of reprisal."

"Knowing this, and knowing that you will need all of the consolation our blessed church offers to the dying, I send you a rosary, blessed by the Holy Father, and which will extend to you all of the resignation necessary to enable you to support your last earthly cross."

"I send you, then, this rosary, and pray that you may have strength to support this ordeal."

"Lovingly,
"PACHUCHA."

Arrived at the prison, the old woman delivered the note and the rosary and returned to the castle.

The commanding officer took the rosary, which was of large-sized beads, such as pilgrims bring back from the Holy Land, and, after reading the unsealed letter carefully over, announced to the officer of the guard:

"I will take it to him myself."

Entering, the commander addressed the prisoner: "General, the court-martial has rendered its verdict—one of the shortest ever handed in, and the verdict is—Death!"

"To-morrow, at sunset, you die!"

"Thanks, captain," returned Juarez, imperturbably. "But is it for this alone that you visited me? Would not to-morrow have done just as well? and I could have had twenty-four hours of peace yet."

"But, general, your daughter"—and at her name Juarez trembled, but ever so slightly—"desires me to hand you this," and the captain, somewhat hurt in his dignity, handed over the rosary and left the room where the prisoner was confined.

Juarez grasped the rosary, examined it, suppressed a cry of delight, and suddenly his eye glistened; he stood erect and, drawing closer to the window and making certain that he was unobserved, began to count the beads.

Reaching the forty-seventh he stopped, and then,

with extraordinary precautions against being discovered, he unscrewed the bead.

An infinitesimal sized ball of a greasy gray fell out into his trembling hand and thence to the floor.

Stooping and picking it up, Juarez unrolled the morsel of parchment and found it covered with cipher writing.

But this cipher was well understood by the Mexican general, and, arranged according to their key, the two lines read thus:

"When on thy way, watch for the swinging cord. Fear naught; your friends are alert, and at the last hour you will be saved. Courage!"

And then, reading the open letter the captain had handed him, he understood that his daughter was moving Heaven and earth for his release, and that she had found friends—perhaps the same to whom he had applied.

And the day passed calmly and quietly, and his sleep that night was sound and peaceful. But his rest was broken by the sound of the bells tolling to mass those who would pray for the repose of men's souls, and his heart could but fail him as he thought of the fearful odds that were arrayed against his release and escape.

For what could a frail girl and half a dozen mere lads do against the combined power of the Hapsburgs and the Napoleonic dynasty?

The combination seemed too strong, and Juarez began to look his coming death squarely in the face and to nerve himself so as not to flinch before the enemies of his country, when the lean barrels should be leveled and only word would be wanting to make them pour forth a volcano of fire and smoke and cruel lead which would waft away his life as the smoke would drift away on the evening breeze; as the echo of the shots would die away in the distant hills; as the smile of scorn would die away from his set face; as yonder sun would soon sink for him—forever.

But these thoughts—only, alas! too often the visitors of the condemned man—crowded bitterly upon him, the sound of footsteps in the corridor outside aroused him from his reverie, and as the key grated harshly in the lock he became himself again—the stern leader of the Mexican forces, who, not many years after, was to pronounce sentence of death on Maximilian—ay, and execute it, too!

Yet as the door swung open and the admitting officer gave entrance and lowly salutation to the visiting monk, who thanked him in low and melodious tones of perfect French, the countenance of Juarez fell, for he thought that this was but one of the lugubrious harbingers of death.

Yet only for a moment was his eye downcast, for, happening to peer beneath the cowl of the brother, he recognized the speaking countenance of Raphael Douglass, who, posing a finger on his lip, counseled greatest prudence.

CHAPTER V. THE RESCUE.

The sun was sinking low in the West, as the gates of the fortress flew open and the detail, who were to fire the shots, that were to usher the prisoner into eternal night, marched out, Juarez, with bare head and hands bound behind him, walking proudly in their midst.

Beside him walked the monk who had appeared to him in his prison cell, and who, with his cowl still hanging over his face so as to completely conceal his features, bent low, and seemed to be murmuring the prayers for those about to die, while Juarez handled, nervously, the famous rosary which had been sent to him the day before, bearing words of comfort.

The news of the coming execution of the Mexican general had spread about the village, and the narrow streets were crowded with the curious while each overhanging window had its quota of spectators.

As the mournful procession moved on through the by-ways which led to the spot chosen for the execution, the crowd grew denser and denser, until, at length, so narrow was the passageway left in the middle of the street, that the soldiers were forced to gradually form into fours, then to march in double file and in some instances, singly.

The result of this was that Juarez walked some distance ahead of the main body and of the officer in command, who vainly endeavored to press to the head of the column, the Mexican general being thus surrounded only by the death-detail, whose guns were unloaded.

For that no soldier might shirk, the bullets were not to be dropped into the barrels until the place of execution had been reached.

Thus no friend of the victim could possibly extract the ball and hold himself guiltless of his possible death, for that reason, even if he should aim to miss.

The guard was kept busy thrusting back the encroaching crowd with blows from the butts of their guns, or thrusts from their bayonets, and succeeded in keeping a narrow lane open.

At length they reached a cross-street, and just as Juarez and his immediate guards had passed it, a huge wagon, drawn by two yoke of oxen, and piled high with sacks of grain, cut the procession in two as it came down from the side alley, and, extending completely across the narrow street, entirely blocked the way with its bulk.

The main portion of the guard as well as the officer in command were thus entirely cut off from the prison, and so high was the wagon piled with the sacks of grain, that all view of even the upper stories of the houses was cut off.

It is hardly necessary to state that the driver of

this obstructing vehicle was one of Raphael's friends, who was carefully disguised as a peon, and had so exactly timed his arrival as to intercept the procession precisely where he wished.

So soon as the oxen, obedient to his command, had come to a stand-still he dropped his goad and, mingling with the crowd, was at once out of danger.

Just past the corner stood a building of three stories in height that had at one time been used as a sub-convent, but being abandoned some time before had been used as a storehouse by a hay and grain-dealer of the neighborhood.

From above one of the upper windows projected a short, stout beam, through one end of which a rope passed, working over a pulley, and used to hoist sacks of grain and bales of hay to the upper stories.

As Juarez surrounded by the eight men detailed to shoot him, and standing next to the monk, stopped to see what would be the result of this interruption, the guards pressing about the Mexican general to prevent his escape, the monk suddenly encircled the prisoner with his robust arm, while at the same moment the end of a rope, thrown from one of the windows overhead, fell at his feet.

The monk, holding Juarez about the body with his left arm, seized the rope with his right hand, twisted it once around his arm, and the cord tautened, the monk and Juarez were lifted up and drawn rapidly to the window from which projected the beam and pulley, until they reached the sill.

And there half a dozen nervous hands grasped them and drew them into the room, through the window, out of sight of the howling, seething mob beneath.

And the soldiers below stood, open-mouthed, hardly comprehending, even yet, what had happened.

At the same moment a shot rung out on the air, and a bullet, burying itself in the window-frame, splintered the wood in a dozen fragments, but did no other damage.

The commanding officer, crushing through the crowd, had crawled under the wagon, and risen to his feet, just in time to see the abduction, and, leveling his pistol with an oath—

"Malediction!" he cried, "at least they shall not save him alive!" and he fired; but the bullet flew wide of the mark, and despite his efforts, the prisoner was, for the present at least, safe.

Amid the roar and confusion of the crowd began to be heard the cries and shrieks of the wounded, as beaten and thrust back at sword and bayonet-point, they crowded in to door and passage ways and crushed and crowded back into the side street.

At length the main body forced its way to the building into which Juarez had been lifted and attacked the door with vigorous blows of muskets; but the lower part of the building was of stone and the door remained firm in its stone casing, so for a time their efforts were futile.

But at length, beneath the blows rained upon it, the door gave way and fell back to the floor with a loud crash, while the captain of the garrison, followed by a crowd of his soldiers, rushed into the room and up the stairs, searching on every floor and in every nook and corner for Juarez and his rescuer.

The warehouse was absolutely empty, and not a trace of the fugitives was to be seen, save the discarded robe of the false monk, which lay in one corner where he had thrown it in his flight.

And then the bare room echoed to the sound of oaths and rage, as the soldiers found that the men they were in search of had really escaped; and the officer, realizing what disgrace would attach to him for his neglect, was wild with anger.

"Surround the house!" he cried, "and then set fire to it. They must be concealed somewhere herein, and we will drive them from their hiding-places like rats from their holes!"

And in obedience to his orders, the building was soon concealed in a cloud of smoke, while the flames leaped high aloft; yet, though the cordon of soldiers gathered close about the house and not a loop-hole of escape seemed left, the wall finally fell in, and nothing was left but a mass of glowing ruins, while of the fugitives not a trace had been discovered.

As Juarez and the monk swung into the window, they were greeted by three of the comrades that Raphael had stationed in the warehouse the night before, and who had thrown the rope and then lifted the two by means of the pulley to the height of the window.

Not a word was exchanged; but Raphael, hastily throwing off his monkish disguise and buckling his sword belt about him, rapidly descended the stairs, and proceeding to a back room paved with square stones, counted five from the door, and kneeling beside the one designated, drew his sword and inserted the point in a crevice at one side and near the corner.

"I trust," he muttered, "that the monk was not romancing!"

He referred to a secret confided to him by a former inmate of the monastery, whom he had saved from a band of foot-pads who were about to torture him.

But his mind was soon at ease, for as he pressed the stone shook and, moved by some concealed spring, half-turned over, and remaining with upturned edge, left uncovered a yawning hole, the depths of which were black as midnight, while at the entrance were to be seen the first steps of a stone staircase.

"Excellent!" remarked Juarez. "The monks were well provided for in case the abbot refused them permission to go out!" and he laughed quietly to

himself, with the air of a man who feels a heavy load lifted from his breast.

One of the Americans was provided with a lantern; and this being lighted, Raphael, taking it in his hand, led the way into the subterranean passage as it seemed.

These steps, however, led only into a cellar of about ten feet square, and once arrived there, Raphael turned and awaited until the last of his followers had closed the trap, so that nothing could be perceived by any one entering the room above.

Then walking to one corner of the room, where stood an empty hogshead, he rolled it to one side, disclosing a small iron door, fastened by a bolt, which being shot back allowed the door to swing easily inward.

As the door opened, a puff of air, fresher than that of the cellar, struck their faces, and through a long, low, narrow passage, dug out of the earth, could be seen a glimmer of light some distance away.

The door being drawn to and fastened on the outside with a heavy bolt, the little party of rescuers and rescued proceeded down the passage, which sloped gently, and finally arrived at the end, which was just above the water's edge, the opening being hidden by a massive clump of the luxurious vegetation of Mexico.

A little bay had been dug just at the mouth of the passage, and herein floated a row-boat, large enough to carry half a dozen persons, and seated in it was the false peon who had driven the ox-team.

In a few moments all had embarked, and as the shadows of the evening came down the boat shot out into the stream, and propelled by two pair of oars, proceeded rapidly with the current down the Rio de Nazas, in the direction of Mount Desert.

And as they sped away safely, the sky was bright with the reflection from the burning warehouse, and they could hear the hoarse cries of the soldiery as they searched hither and thither for the fugitives, who laughed at their efforts as every moment brought them nearer to Mount Desert and carried them further away from Durango.

At length the grim walls of the castle loomed dark ahead, and soon the prow of the boat grated on the gravelly shore, and leaping out, the little band gathered about Juarez, and congratulated him upon the successful termination of their enterprise.

But with a wave of his hand he hushed them, and then spoke, requesting that not a word be said until he had thanked Raphael and his comrades, through him, for their courage and devotion to him, which had saved him from the bullets of his enemies.

A mutual interchange of compliments took place, and at length the party proceeded toward the castle entrance, thinking soon to be seated before a hearty meal, of which all stood in much need.

But as they drew near to the spot where such brilliant feats of swordsmanship had been performed, a hoarse and unknown voice hailed them in French, and at the same moment, the click of a cocked musket was heard.

As the remainder of the party stopped short, Raphael, stepping forward and drawing his sword, answered in his purest French:

"The officer of the guard!"

And advancing still closer, as the sentinel demanded the countersign, with that same blow of his sword-hilt that he had practiced on his opponents of a day or two before, he laid the sentry flat on the grass before he could utter a cry.

But, as he fell, his finger, which was on the trigger of his gun, involuntarily, or rather mechanically, pressed it, and the report followed, sounding doubly loud in the quiet of the night, broken only by the rushing waters of the neighboring river.

At the flash, Juarez and the rest of the lads sprang to assist Raphael, but the latter turning to them, spoke rapidly:

"Retreat to the boat and cross the river, making enough noise to draw the guard after you; I will enter the park and reconnoiter, and then join you."

And turning, he leaped to the door beside which he crouched, undistinguishable in the darkness, and the shadows cast by the wall.

In a moment the tramp of the guards was heard, accompanied by the clash of arms, and the door being thrown open, a dozen men, with an officer at their head, marched out of the park.

The hurried retreat of Juarez and Raphael's companions was then plainly heard, as, making as much noise as they could, they retreated toward the river, obedient to the instructions they had received.

Hearing this noise and thinking of no treachery, the officer ordered his men to follow, and, waving his sword, he started in pursuit of the fugitives, who could not be seen, so dark was the night, and who, ceasing to disclose their whereabouts by making any further disturbance, disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened and engulfed them.

The soldiers, therefore, after searching for some time, gave up the chase and returned to the castle, not doubting that, during their absence, Raphael had profited by it to slip into the park and hide in the shrubbery near the house.

The sentinel who had been so rudely felled was found to be still insensible, and was carried in and laid on a cot, while the gate was left in charge of a double guard, with orders to shoot any one down at sight, without even challenging them or waiting for a word.

One or two sentinels were also placed inside to prevent surprise, but more were not needed, as the castle on three sides surmounted the precipitous rock round which circled the whirling waters of the Rio de Nazas.

And soon all within the castle seemed to sink into

slumber, and Raphael was left free to pursue his investigations at ease, fearing nothing from the sentries, whose attention was entirely turned to the exterior of the wall, and who feared no inside foe.

Still it was with considerable caution that he proceeded, for the night was so intensely dark and the shadows from trees and shrubbery so dense that, familiar as he was with the ground over which he was walking, he feared stumbling and making some noise which would betray him.

Suddenly he did stumble and fell headlong, and as he did so barely checked a cry of horror as it rose to his lips.

His foot had caught in the curb of an old, unused well, which tradition said was almost unfathomable, and he had been saved almost by a miracle, for, as he fell, the point of his scabbard had caught in a crevice of the stones and flung him violently to one side.

Without this interposition, which seemed direct from above, he would have plunged headlong into the yawning gulf below and none would ever have known his fate.

It was not before some little time that he recovered his nerves, for the shock had been great; but soon he was on his feet and preparing to make the effort he intended when he had left the Mexican general outside and entered the park.

He had been looking for the well when chance had nearly thrown him into it and made it his tomb, and after such a narrow escape it seemed as if he would shun it like death; but feeling around the curb a moment, he caught the firm edge of the stone securely in his hands, and letting himself down, felt with his feet against the slimy sides of the pit.

CHAPTER VI.

A FEARFUL DEATH.

ANY person unfamiliar with the surroundings of Mount Desert would have thought that Raphael had taken leave of his senses, and that, disgusted with life, he was about to commit suicide by throwing himself down the well.

But any such idea was far from his thoughts and he had not forgotten his intention of entering the castle; yet as it was occupied by his enemies and it would be difficult to pass in through the front door, he decided to use other means of ingress.

When he had first taken possession of the castle, he had consulted with his intimate, Bob Stanhope, in regard to the best means of circumventing any attacking-party that might bring siege against the house, and had come to the conclusion that one of the best means to adopt would be to perfect several secret entrances, and this was done.

There were half a dozen different ways of penetrating within the building, and it was as full of secret hiding-places, of disguised traps, pitfalls for the unwary and hidden passages as any old chateau of the XIIIth Century.

And in piercing one of these underground entrances, Raphael had utilized the old well, which had so nearly been his tomb, as the place where entrance and exit could be well effected, as no one would suspect its existence if a passage were pierced on one side and far enough down.

As he hung far down, feeling with his feet, they finally encountered an obstruction which projected out from the stones that formed the sides of the well, and which was firm and solid under the pressure it received.

This was one of a series of spikes driven solidly at intervals of two or three feet, and down which Raphael descended with as much ease and safety as if they had been the steps of a wide and smoothly-carpeted stairway.

There were probably forty of these iron steps, and when the last was reached the water in the well glimmered far below, showing to what a tremendous depth the diggers had gone when they sunk it, far back in the dim years of the past.

Just below the last spike was a narrow ledge, giving rest to the feet and no more, and here Raphael's downward journey ended and his next course would be lateral.

As he stood thus on the platform, still holding on to the spike above, there was, just in front of his breast, a black spot, which, where all was inky, denoted an opening, and into this he thrust his hand, which there encountered an iron bar, stretching across the hole a couple of inches from its lower side and about two feet from the entrance.

Grasping this firmly and stooping, he was able to thrust his head in the hole and then draw his body after him, and thus proceeding, soon found himself in the passage which gave access to the castle.

The tunnel had a decided inclination upward, and it was no easy matter to drag himself along, particularly as the hole was barely large enough to allow his body to slip through—for a larger person the passage would have been impossible, the boys having reserved the use for themselves.

The journey was a long one, and more fatiguing on account of the intense heat and want of ventilation, yet in time it was accomplished, and Raphael stood erect in a small room, dug out of the earth, and which, apparently, had no other outlet than the one which Raphael had just left.

Yet it had its secret, and with this Raphael was familiar.

In one corner was a pile of earth, left there evidently by the diggers, and not thought worth removing, and approaching this, the boy putting his foot against it, and bracing himself against the wall, rushed with all his strength.

The whole heap after a slight resistance yielded and turned slowly around, leaving bare a square hole large enough to admit his body, and half a dozen feet deep.

The earth had been piled on a board which turned on a pivot, mixed with a little mortar to make it firm, and left to hide the opening beneath.

The boy, after pulling the earth-cover back in its place—what seemed a useless precaution—pulled on a rope which hung in a shaft in front of him, and raised to his level a sort of an elevator, raised and lowered by an endless rope traveling over a pulley above and passing through the center of the shelf.

Stepping on this shelf and pulling hard on the other rope, he mounted rapidly, quietly and smoothly, and with very little exertion on his part, there evidently being a balancing weight attached to the rope.

The shaft through which he was passing was pierced in the wall of the castle, which was tremendously thick and built according to the architecture of the feudal ages.

Arrived at a certain height he ceased pulling, and holding the rope, removed a peg in the side of the shaft which he had felt for, and applied his eye to the opening left.

He could scarce restrain a cry of joy.

The room into which he was looking was the one which adjoined his, and was used as a common sitting-room by all of the boys.

And there with her head resting on her hand, plainly visible by the light of a lamp which burned at her elbow, sat Donna Pachucha, in deep thought and alone.

Scarcely stopping to replace the peg, Raphael hoisted himself still higher up to the roof of the castle, and here fastened his elevator, and then, crawling out on one of the huge beams which supported the upper structure, clambered lightly to the floor, raised a trap in the ceiling over his room, and which was ingeniously contrived to appear as the center molding, dropped to the floor, and in a moment more had opened the connecting door, and stood, cap in hand and finger on lip to enforce silence, before Donna Pachucha.

And the girl started to her feet with a half-hushed cry of surprise and joy, while a skilled observer would have been able to judge, from the deep blush which suffused her cheek, that only the person whom she had been thinking of now stood before her.

But there was time for nothing but explanations, which were rapidly exchanged, and Raphael learned how it was that the soldiers were in possession of the castle.

Maurigot, the wounded Frenchman, had managed to escape from his room by the window, to scale the wall and reach the citadel of Durango, the commandant of which had placed twenty men at his disposal, returning with whom he had no difficulty in capturing the defenseless building which Raphael had imagined the troops would consider beneath their notice.

But the harm was done, and now the question was, how to rectify it?

The first thing in order was to rescue Donna Pachucha, yet as he recollected the narrowness of the subterranean passage, and examined her flowing dress, he almost despaired of aiding her to escape.

Yet a thought struck him, and returning to his room, he soon returned with a complete suit of clothes belonging to himself, and which he had never worn, and explaining the necessity of the change requested her to don them while he made a tour of inspection through the castle.

The brave girl, recognizing the pressing need which prompted such a request, acquiesced, and Raphael, opening the door and cautiously closing it after him, proceeded on tip-toe down-stairs.

His good luck or his good sense guided him direct to the person he most wished to see, now that he had met Donna Pachucha.

Seeing a bright light streaming from a half-opened door, and which was concealed from the outside, by the heavy curtains which hung over the windows, he approached and cautiously looked in.

And there, seated at table and facing the door, was the only one of the band who had not assisted at the rescue of Juarez—Rob Stanhope—he having been seriously injured by a blow on the head during the attack on the inn, and unable to join the party.

Opposite Stanhope, with whom he was playing cards, sat the French officer Maurigot, with his head bound up, and utterly unconscious of anything extraordinary passing behind him; for Raphael, knowing well that he could depend on Rob's nerve and self-control, had quietly stepped inside the room into full view.

He had not been mistaken in depending on his friend, for although he raised his eyes as the intruder entered, not a muscle quivered, and it being his turn, he played as coolly as if deliverance were not at hand.

And in an instant that deliverance came, for Raphael, in an instant more had leaped on the officer, and with one hand over his mouth, garroted him so completely that the man could not utter a single cry before he was helpless.

Rob's feet were bound, yet he staggered around to Raphael's assistance, and aided him in binding and gagging the Frenchman, whom they then cast in the shadow of a corner, where he lay as helpless as a trussed fowl.

Cutting the cords at Rob's ankles, the two then remounted to the upper story, where they scratched gently on the door, which was immediately opened by the blushing Donna, who looked particularly lovely and lovable in the handsome costume that Raphael had provided.

It was no time for explanations and Stanhope took everything for granted as following the girl who was preceded by the young leader, the latter carrying a small bundle the Mexican had made of

her clothes he assisted her to reach the rafters above and thence the elevator.

As this would bear but one at a time, Rob descended first being followed by the girl and she in turn by Raphael who had reserved to himself the post of danger and who remained behind in case of an attack.

But none came and nothing happened to them as they crawled down the narrow tunnel to the well, feet first, the girl making the passage as bravely as her companions and proving herself the worthy daughter of a brave father.

Nor did she flinch when the most dangerous portion of their journey confronted her; Bob going first she preceded Raphael who encouraged her during the perilous climb, while her delicate but nervous hands grasped the spikes until the iron sunk deep into the tender flesh, and her tiny feet were planted as firmly as if she were walking on her native plains.

She realized now how wise Raphael had been in advising her to change her dress, for incumbered by female drapery she never could have climbed that fearful height.

At length the trio reached the top in safety and emerging cautiously from the mouth of the well, crawled away a little distance and lying flat looked carefully around to see if any straggler from the house was in the vicinity; but all seemed silent and they proceeded toward the wall.

Once arrived there it was a simple matter for the two boys to aid the girl in surmounting the wall, which was done without mishap and it was not long before they arrived at the banks of the river where the long, low hoot of the night-owl, uttered to perfection by Raphael, brought a response from the other side and soon after the boat appeared.

Crossing over Donna Pachucha was soon in her father's arms, who was well-nigh overcome by this unexpected gift and could but feebly express his thanks to Raphael.

Not far away was a small shed used as a temporary shelter for the hay that was cut on the river-banks, before it was carted to the castle and to this Donna Pachucha and Juarez were directed for rest.

In this humble edifice, lying on the sun-dried grass and with a heavy cloak over her, guarded by the Americans who were stationed around outside, the girl slept as quietly as if in the most sumptuous apartment of her father's mansion, while he, pacing to and fro, or seated in deep thought, pondered far into the small hours of the morning.

But Raphael, who could not remain idle while a foe was in his home, called to Stanhope and, asking one of the boys to row them across the river and then return, while they proceeded to the castle to endeavor to learn from the old man-of-all-work the number of troops quartered there.

As the abandoned well offered the most secure means of reaching the interior of the building, now that Raphael knew that the room next his own was untenanted, he resolved to make use of it again, despite the fact that he was well-nigh worn out and that the ascent of the tunnel was tedious and fatiguing.

So, followed by Rob, whose head was still sore from the effects of the blow he had received, Raphael once more climbed the wall, avoided the sentries and reached the mouth of the well without any adventure whatever.

Arrived there, the lad requested Stanhope to remain concealed near by and await his arrival, as he could watch for any new developments, and in case Raphael did not return in a certain length of time, could return to the party, and inform him that their leader was captured, which would be the case if he were not back in two hours.

The others, in this event, could then take measures looking toward his rescue.

Rob was at length convinced by these arguments, although he preferred sharing his friend's peril, so leaning over the curb he listened as Raphael descended the spikes until the slight rasping, as each one was struck by the sole of his shoe, was almost lost in the distance.

Rob was about to turn away, convinced that the other was safe for the present, at least, when there came from below, a sharp snap, a piercing cry in a second or two a heavy splash, and then all was still.

One of the treacherous bits of iron had snapped in his hand and Raphael had been hurled to a certain death at the bottom of the fathomless pit!

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE JAWS OF DEATH!

THE piercing cry uttered by Raphael as he was dashed to the bottom of this fearful tomb, gathering strength as it surged upward through this enormous speaking-trumpet, leaped from the mouth of the well with a volume that made it sound like the cry of forty men instead of one.

Stanhope, horror-stricken as he was, remained glued to the earth, his feet seeming like lead and too heavy for him to lift them in flight.

Yet the attention of the sentries had been attracted and three of them came running toward him, leaving one on guard at the gate for fear of an attack.

As the soldiers, who were indirectly the causes of his comrade's fate, came near him, he lost his head, already weakened by the stroke at the inn, and drawing rapier he rushed on them like a whirlwind, the fire of insanity in his blood-shot eyes.

Nothing human could stand such an onslaught, and the unfortunate wretch who was in the lead had better have been in his own dear France, that bore him, than there that night, for the bayonet thrust was turned aside as if the heavy musket had been a wheat-straw in the hands of a child, while, with the

same motion, Stanhope turned the point of his sword against the other's breast, and in an instant the blade had passed through cloth and flesh and bone, while the clash of the guard against the buttons on the soldier's coat, showed what power had been put in the thrust.

Not stopping in his headlong rush the boy jerked the smoking steel from its human scabbard, and dropping to his knees—for often the strength of insanity lies in its cunning—avoided the two bullets which whizzed over his head and then, with a bound, gave attack.

His sword darted and flamed and flashed, parried and cut and thrust, until the soldiers, sore and wounded and believing that a demon was attacking them, turned and fled, only to be pierced by the cruel blade through the back, between the shoulders, one after the other and to fall, weltering in their blood, dying within a minute of each other.

Grasping the gun which one had let fall, he pursued his headlong course to the gate, where with a descending blow of the musket he broke down the guard of the sentry crushing in his skull like an egg-shell.

In a few moments he had reached the river-bank and plunging in, swam to the other shore with such speed, that the soldiers in the castle, roused by the shots, scarce had arrived at the gate when he was safe.

Then falling like a thunderbolt among his startled companions, and having become more collected during his passage across the river, he told his mournful tale of the awful fate that had overtaken Raphael, amid cries of sorrow, anger and expressions of vengeance.

Some were in favor of making an immediate attack on the castle, but wiser counsels prevailed, and General Juarez finally persuaded them to at least wait for daylight before acting, and promised to reinforce them from among his friends and aid them before rejoining the army.

Not least among the mourners was Donna Pachucha, who wept far into the night, for her gentle heart had turned toward the young American, and it was with feelings a little more than kind that she regarded him.

But at length the camp resumed its former aspect, save that the lads were, most of the time, gathered together, discussing what they had best do, and repeating the numerous lovable traits of character Raphael possessed.

At early dawn a messenger was dispatched for some provisions of which they stood in much need, and all action was deferred until after a hearty breakfast, which they were about discussing it being nearly eight o'clock, when a movement of the bushes just at the water's edge, on the opposite bank attracted their attention, while in a moment more they, each and every one, arose to their feet, with a loud cry of terror, mingled with joy and astonishment, forgetting all about their breakfast and their hunger, which, a moment before had been ravenous.

As the spike by which he held broke in his hand, the shock which came so unexpectedly, threw Raphael out toward the middle of the well, and as he grasped at the smooth surface, as a drowning man is said to clutch at a straw, the only result was the tearing of his fingers and nails until they bled.

It was then that he uttered the cry which had sounded so horribly to the hearers above, as he realized that all hope was lost and that he was descending, with ever increasing speed, toward a certain and horrible death below.

The fall, which lasted but a few instants, yet seemed to him the duration of centuries and the pictures that memory presented were like instantaneous photographs, so realistic and so varied were they.

Yet, the last of the many ideas that flashed through his brain, came the recollection of the lovely Mexican girl and the thought—"How I might have loved her, and how happy we might have been!"

And at that instant, as even in that fearful moment he was dropping through space with the speed of a comet a smile was on his lips at the vision of her beauty, there came a shock, so sudden and so severe that a thousand flames danced before his eyes, a sensation of icy chillness struck to the very marrow of his bones, while in an instant the pleasant picture conjured by his memory vanished as by magic, and he was restored to consciousness of his present condition.

The well into which Raphael had been precipitated, dug as it was in a hill, naturally had to reach below the bed of the adjacent river, in order that a constant supply of water might be maintained, and to assure this supply in case of siege, a small drain had been cut from the well to the river.

It had probably happened that the river was unusually high at the time of the sinking of the well, for it was very certain that no sound of running water had ever been noticed by any of the boys, which would certainly be the case, had the communication between the river-water and well still existed.

And it was also possible that the men engaged in constructing it had mistaken their calculations—certain it is that the small amount of water the well contained came from drainage from the hill or the showers that fell.

And this water saved Raphael; for instead of falling, as was to be supposed, from the long drouth that had existed, on the almost bare rocks that formed the bottom, he plunged, feet first, happily into about twelve feet of fluid—for it was certainly not pure water.

Never used, never stirred up, with all manner of rubbish accumulating for so many years, the mass at the bottom was nauseous, fetid, ill-smelling,

sewer-like, and more of the consistency of mortar than water.

But this was in his favor, for it broke the shock better than a purer fluid would, and, although when, striking out vigorously, he arose to the surface of this unsavory mess, his eyes, nostrils and mouth were full of the foul stuff; yet his life was saved, and who would not submit to a few disagreeables to attain such an end!

It was with much difficulty that Raphael sustained himself on the surface of the offensive matter which enveloped him; but by thrusting the blade of his knife far into a crevice in the rock he was able to do so.

After further efforts he found a like place in which to lodge his rapier, on the same level with his knife, and placing a floating bough from one to the other, he made quite a comfortable seat, the rocky side of the well serving as a back.

It was still night as he could tell by looking up at the mouth of the well, far above his head, but a grayish light was stealing over the sky and he knew that day could not be far off.

He would have given much for a mouthful of bread—more for a cupful of water; yet as these were unattainable, he took matters as philosophically as possible under the circumstances, which did not present very flattering prospects.

But he knew that he had firm friends, and that, even at the risk of having to surrender to the possessors of the castle, they would return and search for his body to give it better burial than it had found at the bottom of the abandoned well of Mount Desert.

But as the day dawned a ray of light, which surely did not come from above, danced on the side of the well opposite where Raphael was sitting, but much higher up, and attracted his attention instantly; so turning and bending out as far he could, he saw that it streamed from a hole some distance above his head.

He then recalled the traditions he had heard of a connecting opening between the river and the well, and a thrill of hope—the first that he had felt since his fall—lit up his heart as the ray of sunlight overhead lit up the noisome vapors and shadows of the foul pit that entombed him.

At once he began to act, and drawing from the filth at his feet a branch that was sound and strong, he fashioned it into a number of short, stout, wedges, to the number of a dozen, and then began his upward journey, sinking and driving the sharpened edge of the pins into the cracks and crevices with which the rocks were seamed and split and scarred in all directions from the action of the air and showers.

As he neared the beacon light which guided him to freedom, his task became easier, for below it were numerous holes drilled by the openers of the drain, to support their platforms, and into these it was a simple matter to thrust his pins.

And so he crept slowly up, sometimes not making six inches at a time, sometimes gaining nearly a yard, until at length he was on a level with the opening, and he could see, dancing in the sunlight, the rippling waters of the Nazas, which made a bend below and could be traced for a long distance.

The means of escape offered him were narrow—fearfully narrow; but with life and liberty beckoning to him from the other end, every faculty was on the alert to reach them; while, to add to his wish to soon be free, he distinguished on the opposite bank a little band who he was sure were his friends, and amid them the flutter of a mantilla denoted the presence of Donna Pachucha, she having assumed her own attire.

By crawling on his stomach, by removing a morsel of rubbish here and there, tearing his clothes to strips, scarring and scratching his shoulders, lacerating his fingers until they bled, he at length arrived at the end of the passage and, emerging into the open air, parted the shrubbery and stepped to the water's edge, which was just at his feet.

It was at this apparition, which had so startled the party who were about to breakfast on the opposite bank; and truly he presented an appearance well-calculated to terrify the stoutest-hearted beholder who might thus confront him, issuing thus as he did, apparently straight from the bowels of the earth.

Covered from head to foot with a thick coating of greasy black slime, with torn clothes, blood dripping from twenty cuts and scratches, received while falling and in his passage to the open air, Raphael was a hideous sight.

Yet, despite this disguise that so completely enveloped him from head to foot, there was a certain something about him, his carriage or his figure, that was recognizable, and not a soul on the opposite bank failed to know him the moment he appeared, save, perhaps General Juarez, who neither knew him intimately, nor had his heart interested.

But their joy at seeing him alive, was tempered by the proofs he bore of the sufferings he had undergone, and this accounted for the various emotions expressed in the cries that they had uttered.

However, feeling much better already, from the effects of the fresh air, after breathing the noxious vapors distilled from the putrescence into which he had fallen, Raphael plunged mid-deep into the river, and after thoroughly bathing his face and head, drank deep of the cool liquid, and then, not awaiting the arrival of the boat, which was putting out from the opposite shore, and coming to his encounter, he dove far out in the stream, and swam to the other side.

A dozen hands aided him to land, and half as

many voices welcomed him, congratulated him, and plied him question upon question, all speaking at once, and not awaiting the answers they seemed so eager to receive.

At length he procured silence, and begged a little time, saying that he was famished and in sore need of new clothing.

Without a word, Donna Pachucha arose from where she was seated on a log, and going to the shed returned with the clothes she had worn, and handed them to Raphael, who had stepped out from the rest, and gone toward her.

"What, not a word from you, who would add more value to it, than all this I have listened to?" he half whispered.

And prettily murmured, and accompanied with much confusion, came the answer in softest Castilian:

"I cannot say what I will—I will not say what I can!"

Enigmatical, perhaps, but apparently perfectly satisfactory to Master Raphael, who walked off, around the bend, to finish his ablutions and perfect his toilet.

And when, seated at breakfast, he gave them full narrative of all his dangers and escapes, many were the exclamations of wonder and pity, yet none seemed as valuable to him as an occasional tear that sparkled in the eye of his Mexican neighbor, a stealthy look of pity that so often stole toward him, or a glance of admiration, surreptitiously bestowed by the same fair donor.

"And now, gentlemen," said Raphael, "'By Saint Denis,' as my ancient professor of fencing was wont to say, I am off to recapture Mount Desert, though there were a regiment of Frenchmen there!"

"Who follows me?"

"I," "And I," "And I," came from each of the young companions that knew Raphael so well and loved him; but Juarez shook his older head and counseled moderation and patience, but the young brains would not reason, so he had no alternative but to join them, first making them promise that they would at least wait until they could procure horses, their own being at the castle.

This was such excellent advice that they agreed to it and Rob and another were sent in search of mounts for the party, while the rest waited impatiently for their return, except Pachucha and Raphael, who, strolling off together, seemed to find the time pass pleasantly and rapidly.

CHAPTER VIII. HAND TO HAND.

THE boys returned unsuccessful from their mission, for the country had been scoured by the hostile troops, and not a horse was to be found anywhere in the vicinity of the seat of war.

But this decided Raphael that they had best move at once on the castle, as nothing could be gained by waiting and much depended on their promptness, for at any moment reinforcements might arrive and the force in the castle be so augmented that any attempt to recapture it would surely result in defeat.

So half an hour later Raphael, Juarez and the five boys had gained the interior of the park by a hidden gate, let into the wall, and which so resembled the moss-grown stones that no one, unfamiliar with its whereabouts, would have suspected that such an entrance existed.

As Raphael crawled toward the house he was rejoiced to encounter the old servant, who was gathering wood in the park, and who informed him that a sub-officer had left for Durango, a few moments before, taking several men with him, so that the garrison now consisted of but nine men, all of whom were at this moment gathered outside the gate, leaving no one inside for they expected no attack.

Maurigot had been discovered and released, but could give no account of Rob's escape, and it was not known how it had been effected.

Hastily summoning his friends, Raphael advanced rapidly yet quietly toward the main entrance, and slipping along the wall, slammed the gate and fastened it before the soldiers were aware of his presence, and noticed that, by some unaccountable oversight the guns of the guard were stacked not far off.

These he ordered the old man-servant to carry into the house, one of the boys being sent to scout up and down that the enemy might not come upon them unawares, if they should succeed in scaling the walls.

This left them to the number of six to protect the gate against the attack of the nine men outside, but Raphael considered that number sufficient.

At this moment the heavy oak door trembled beneath a thundery blow that nearly drove it from its hinges but the blow had also broken the trunk of the small tree that had been used as a battering-ram, which had been brought from near by, and rendered it useless.

As Maurigot was looking about for another piece of wood which would serve his purpose, an Alsatian, a veritable giant spoke to him.

"Allow me, my captain, to try my shoulders. The door has yielded some, and in Italy I broke in more than one gate, stronger than this is, without any trouble."

And at a sign from Maurigot he put his shoulder against the gate, and stooping, exerted an enormous pressure; yet the hinges still held.

"Wait a moment," murmured the Colossus. "I'll fetch it yet," and he changed his position so as to place both of his broad shoulders against the oak and pushed, and torn from its fastenings, the door, massive as it was, fell inward.

But the unfortunate Alsatian also stumbled backward as the support gave way, and, as one of the boys, fearing his efforts, had just then passed his sword through an opening in the wood, used for the purpose of seeing without being seen, the steel pierced the soldier through any through the body, and, vomiting a guttural German oath and a flood of froth and blood, he fell to the ground a corpse.

"Eight left," muttered the boy, "and we are six. I would not give much for their chances!" and he ranged himself alongside of his companions as the soldiers, furious at the death of their comrade, rushed through the open gate with drawn swords, and made for the Americans.

But as the soldiers advanced, the sentinel who had been stationed outside, and who was the only one armed with a musket, stopped, aimed and fired, and the boy who had wrought the death of the Alsatian fell to the ground with a bullet through his heart.

And Raphael's blood boiled.

"Ah!" he cried, "that shot was the death-signal for all of you!" and his eyes aflame, he fairly leaped on the Frenchmen, his sword circling, followed by the others.

Juarez had replaced his mask, not wishing that it should be known that the Americans had rescued him, and leaped beside Raphael, and placing himself in front of Maurigot, he crossed swords with him.

At the same instant a jet of flame shot from the window of the castle, and the sentry who had fired the fatal shot, leaped into the air, and, turning half round, fell dead; the old servant had avenged his young friend's death.

But Raphael called out and ordered him to fire no more, for as the boy who had been sent to watch the wall had returned, the number of the Americans including Juarez, was six, while the others had been reduced to seven, and Raphael thought that the chances were equal.

He found himself confronted by Schombrun and a soldier, while his friends had but one opponent each. Maurigot and Juarez still fencing furiously, for the Frenchman had, by the mask, recognized his opponent of a night or two before, and was mad for revenge.

But Juarez was as cool while fighting for his life and liberty as if dancing a fandango with some belle of the capital, and, assuming a grim smile, began to "chaff" Maurigot.

"Ah, ah, sir; so we meet again. Your head seems a little unbalanced. Permit me to assist you," and with a marvelous turn of the wrist and a stroke of electrical quickness, he sliced off the Frenchman's remaining ear, close to his head.

The pain maddened the officer still more, and rushing on the Mexican with the fury of a wild beast, he used all of his effort to slay him; but the latter seemed encompassed by a network of iron, so rapidly did his sword whirl and circle about him.

He might have dallied with the Frenchman for some time longer, but as he leaped aside to avoid a more savage thrust than usual, he saw Raphael, who up to this time had kept his two adversaries at bay, suddenly slip and fall on the grass, the ground being made treacherous by the blood of one of the fallen men, which soaked the turf where he stood.

Seeing the urgency of rescue, he stopped, crouched, and his snake-like rapier, gliding under Maurigot's arm, pierced heart and lung and ended the young officer's career forever, while turning so rapidly that Raphael's enemies had no time to take advantage of his fall, he placed himself over him and guarded him with his superhuman skill.

And in an instant the lad was on his feet, and attacking the soldier while Juarez's steel clashed against the sword held by the Austrian, Schombrun.

And Raphael, having now but one adversary, contented himself with twining his rapier, tierce on tierce, with that of the soldier, and with a turn of the wrist sent his antagonist's sword flying twenty feet into the air, over the wall onto the plain beyond.

Then lowering his sword, he turned to the Mexican and saluting his adversary, said:

"Two against one would be unfair, so I leave this beer barrel to be tapped by you, General Juarez!"

But at the name of the redoubtable Mexican, who had become a terror to all of the invaders, Schombrun lost his head, and uncovered himself, and the sword of the other sheathed itself in his heart, passing through the body to the hilt.

The lad and the man who had saved him a moment before, then turned to look after the others.

The three lads had escaped with a few not very serious wounds and had killed two of their adversaries, while the third, almost frightened to death was scampering over the plain, in the direction of Durango, for dear life's sake, being kept company by the soldier whom Raphael had disarmed.

The boys remained complete masters of the field, and returning to the house attended to their wounds, while Raphael and the Mexican, the best friends in the world, for in turn they each were continually aiding the other, went in search of Donna Pachucha, who had remained in the shed where they had passed the preceding night, and who was more than overjoyed to see the two whom she loved best in the world alive and unhurt.

They were soon at the castle, and the girl proved herself the best nurse in the world, and won the undying gratitude of all by the tender manner in which she attended to the different hurts, proving herself a worthy soldier's daughter from the nerve with which she remained unshaken as she bathed and dressed the ghastly cuts and stabs which some of the lads carried.

And as she flitted about the room, light-footed and light-fingered, her father's eyes followed her with a

look of pride, and as ever and anon his eye rested on Raphael, who was engaged on some necessary repairs to his steel cap, which had received more than one hard knock in the late encounter, there was a subdued smile visible under his mustache, and it was evident that he was building up a happy future for these two.

But suddenly he turned to Raphael.

"Body of Bacchus, my friend!" he cried. "It seems to me that we had best seek shelter elsewhere until this storm blows over, for the whole garrison of Durango will be sent here, as soon as they receive the news from our two escaped friends, whom, I think, it would have been wiser to dispatch."

"I know a senior, whose ranch is not far distant, who would receive and shelter us, tho' Maximilian himself attacked us. And he has retainers in abundance."

"What think you, my brave?"

Perhaps had Raphael been alone with his friends he might, with his usual reckless bravery, have defied the united powers of both France and Austria; but he remembered the tender girl who was partly under his charge, and he dared not expose her to all the horrors of siege, assault, and possible defeat.

So he promised to accede to the general's proposition as soon as the last sad rites could be paid to his dead comrade, and decent burial given to the men outside, who, if enemies, were at the same time officers and gentlemen.

And soon as the narrow trenches were dug, and the dead, wrapped in their cloaks, reverently laid therein, they all proceeded to the spot, and stood with uncovered heads while the bronzed veteran spoke a few timely words, that came from the heart and were born of the knowledge that he had that any of those who stood around him might at any moment fill a soldier's unknown and unhonored grave.

And then the earth was shoveled in, and nothing but the silent mounds rose above the manly breasts which, such a short time before, had beaten so high with hope and courage.

But the time for action had come, and shaking off the morbid feelings which the solemn ceremony had given rise to, and directing an old servant to see that head-boards should mark the graves and distinguish them by name, Raphael, followed by his companions, returned to the house to prepare for their journey.

The horses were saddled, and a small covered cart prepared for the girl and the party, bidding adieu, perhaps forever, to the old mansion, rode off slowly down the plain toward the river, the course of which they were to follow for some distance before reaching a fording place.

The horsemen surrounded the little wagon in which Donna Pachucha was seated, holding the reins, while Raphael and she forgot for a time, in animated conversation, the dangers through which they had passed, and those which still might threaten them, the more to be feared, perhaps, for the reason that they were unknown.

Meantime the two soldiers who alone had escaped from the sanguinary conflict which had taken place inside the park, arrived at the citadel of Durango, bleeding, dusty, panting and all but fainting from fatigue and weakness.

Immediately upon their arrival they were ushered into the presence of the commanding officer, who, grizzled and scarred veteran that he was, started to his feet in dismay at the sight of these bloody disturbers of his mid-day meal.

A glass of wine was given to them, which somewhat restored their strength, and then, they being seated on account of their weakness, the stronger of the two related the terrible experiences of the morning and how he had heard one of the combatants addressed as General Juarez.

Then the officer bounded to his feet with a thundering ejaculation at the knowledge that these "beardless striplings," as he chose to term them, should not only snatch his prisoner from the fate that had been prepared for him, but also attack and rout with sword and steel, the flower of his regiment.

And hastily summoning his officers to counsel, they prepared a plan which the younger men proposed and which was, at length, agreed to.

As these "youngsters," as they dubbed the Americans, laughed at their muskets and used against the soldiers nothing but steel, so the officers, twenty in number, experienced swordsmen all, vowed that they would ride after them and bring them back, taking with them nothing but their rapiers and matching their skill against that of these demons of Americans.

And so they rode out, in gallant array, laughing and chatting, and enjoying the expedition as much as if the end lay in a ball-room of their dearly-loved Paris.

CHAPTER IX.

A LIFE-AND-DEATH STRUGGLE.

Soon leaving the open plain, and branching off for a time from the river, to reach it later on, Raphael and the rest of the escort entered an immense forest that extended for some distance to east and west, and the cool shade of which was a pleasant relief after the beating rays of the Mexican sun.

They were unable to proceed at full speed, and Juarez regretted more than once that he had not had a saddle-horse prepared for his daughter, the vehicle which was occupied by her preventing their going faster than a trot.

And they had not penetrated very far into the forest, when a muffled sound, as if from some immense drum, was borne to their ears by the wind which

blew on their backs, and which sound became every moment more and more distinct as they rode on.

Attracted by this unusual noise they finally drew rein, and stopping, listened attentively for a few moments.

"It is nothing more or less than the hoof-beats of horses," at length said Raphael, "and should emanate from a party of horsemen who are pursuing us. But they are still some distance away and the best thing for us to do is to hurry on as rapidly as possible."

And with a blow from the flat of his sword he urged the horse driven by Donna Pachucha to its most rapid trot.

Yet the pursuers drew rapidly nearer and nearer and it was certain that within a mile or two they would have caught up.

"General," said Raphael, "ride on as rapidly as possible and let Donna Pachucha drive with you. My friends and I will stop a little further on and endeavor to check these rough riders long enough to enable you to reach your friend's house, where you can obtain assistance and come to our rescue. It is the only means left and, remember how the French treat their captive women!"

And so it was done, the Mexicans riding on and the five Americans stopping in a glade that opened out in the forest and there awaiting the arrival of their pursuers, who rapidly drew near, and soon rode in sight.

Raphael turned his horse toward the advancing troop and on either side of him his companions wheeled into line, two on each side of their leader, and, like him, drew their swords and awaited the attack.

Raphael spoke but three words as, erect and stern, he sat, awaiting the shock of battle.

"Remember your revolvers!" and he half drew his to see that it was loose and free to his hand, for he well knew that steel alone would not serve them against such tremendous odds.

And as the officers rode into the glade, the boy shouted, raising himself high in his stirrups: "Charge!" and like arrows from the bow they sped against the soldiers.

Raphael hewed his way through them, cutting and thrusting on every side, followed by his companions, and in the living lane they had made they left five dead men on the ground to mark the fury of their course.

The combat was short, but terrible.

The gap made was immediately filled up, and then one of the officers, he from whose hands Raphael had rescued Juarez, recognized the lad as the one who had enacted the monk, his cowl having fallen back as he was lifted to the window on the day of deliverance, and rode straight at him, crying to his comrades: "Leave this one to me!"

Then between these two men began a combat terrible, furious, and as has rarely been seen!

In the manner in which their swords met, clashed, turned, whistled, followed each other through the air, hissing, could be distinguished the movements of two perfect masters of the weapon, actuated by the same deadly passion!

A treacherous stroke from one of the officer's swords had killed Stanhope's horse under him, but he still fought on foot, and seeing an officer riding down on Raphael to stab him in the back he drew his revolver and fired, but the horse swerved and the ball, instead of striking the rider, pierced the neck of his steed and brought him to the ground, and as he arose and placed himself on guard, Rob was before him and with three passes of his sword, added him to the list of killed.

Of the other three boys, one had been killed during the first charge, he having received a sword-thrust under the left armpit as he delivered a death-blow with his right hand, while the other two, though sore wounded held their own, bravely.

A riderless horse galloped by and Rob, grasping his bridle, leaped lightly into the saddle, and, revolver and rapier in hand, rode down on the crowd of swordsmen who surrounded Jack Swift, firing as he advanced, and placing two of the officers hors du combat.

In a moment he was alongside Swift, who had just emptied two saddles with his pistol, the possession of which he had forgotten until Rob spoke, and the two fought desperately like the heroes of old, delivering blows that no mortal could withstand, and leaving a path of blood in whatever direction they rode; the other boy had fallen, mortally wounded, a moment before.

Raphael still fought with the officer, whom he had wounded three times and whom he had forced to retreat far from the other combatants, and who saw that his hour was rapidly approaching, but who was too proud to either surrender or call for help.

Rob and Jack, both wounded, both well-nigh exhausted by the superhuman efforts they had made, were now confronted by nine men, and could not long continue the unequal contest; the time must soon come when their strength would give out, and then—well, until then they would do their *devoir* like brave American boys and if they must die, they would have numerous company to attend them.

And they redoubled the force and fury of their strokes!

But a moment after Rob's sword broke off short, just at the hilt, he having dealt a severer blow than usual which had glanced down, causing the blade to light on the horn of the Frenchman's saddle; and his revolver was empty.

And almost at the same instant Jack's sword-arm was laid open from wrist to shoulder, rendering it useless, palsying his muscles and causing his rapier to fall to the ground from his nerveless hand.

The two gave themselves up for lost; but Raphael, who with his last lunge had pierced the officer's

throat, just at the Adam's apple, with a clean thrust that sent the keen point into the spinal marrow, killing him instantly, rode into the dismayed Frenchmen like a tornado, cutting and slashing right and left, up and down, across and around, while as the crowd parted he cried—"Save yourselves, lads!"—and turning their horses the three wheeled away in the direction whence they had come and started back to the castle.

In taking this direction Raphael wished to withdraw the pursuit from Juarez, although it is doubtful if the nine Frenchmen who were left, could have found heart to proceed much further, wounded and disheartened as they were.

But an accident, or rather incident, happened which gave new direction to their thoughts, and aroused them from the despondency which came over them as they saw their enemies riding away triumphant.

One of the Frenchmen who lay, mortally wounded, right in Raphael's path, half-raised himself on his elbow as the horse came galloping toward him, and the noble brute, to avoid trampling him under foot, leaped over him.

But the officer, who still held his sword in hand, raised still higher, and plunged his weapon to the hilt in the flank of the brute, receiving a blow from an iron-shod hoof an instant after, which crushed his skull to atoms.

But the horse was mortally stricken, and with one wild bound more, fell heavily forward, sending Raphael head-first to the ground, so stunned that he could not rise.

His two friends, whose retreat he was protecting, did not see the fall or its result, and galloped wildly on, leaving their leader in the hands of the exultant Frenchmen.

In a moment they were on him, and before he fully realized what had happened, he was bound hand and foot, and thrown across a spare horse, like a sack of grain, while the officers consulted as to their next move.

It was growing late, for the events narrated had not passed in a moment, and it was too late to think of returning to Durango that night.

Some of the party began to be anxious, for many of them were suffering from wounds, while all were tired and hungry and thirsty, while it was evident that their horses could not carry them much further, without rest and food.

But a young officer, well known in the regiment as a wild, reckless youth, who had been looking about him for some time, at length broke in upon their talk, which began to be a little animated, some counseling this, others arguing for that, and solved the problem for them in a few words.

He recollected that not far off, and reached by a narrow road that branched from the one they had followed, stood an ancient mansion where he had once sought and found shelter, and where the old proprietor, a gentleman of French descent, was only too glad to welcome his countrymen.

He added that the aged De Piebracque, as he was called, had as his sole companion in the huge house, his daughter, Mlle. Ange, who was as much of an angel in face and figure as she was in name, and strongly advised his companions to apply to the old gentleman for the hospitality they so much needed.

This put an immediate end to the discussion, and following the young lieutenant, they penetrated a little further into the forest, and soon came to the road mentioned, down which their guide turned, shining with delight at the thought of again meeting his fair enslaver.

It was not long before the massive towers of the De Piebracque mansion loomed before them, and in response to their calls an aged servitor quickly appeared, his livery as faded as his hair was gray, who, in the name of his master, bade them welcome, and summoned a dozen peons to take charge of their horses.

Being ushered into the immense hall, the rafters of which, smoky with age, were barely visible, owing to its great height, the Chevalier de Piebracque advanced and with grave courtesy offered to them whatever his house contained and with quiet civility waved aside all apologies tendered by the spokesman.

A crowd of servants was placed at their disposal and rooms which had not been entered for years thrown open, while the huge halls echoed for the first time in ages to the tramp of military boots, the jingle of spurs and the clash of accouterments.

The host had been informed that Raphael was an American and a prisoner and asked if a suitable room could be provided whence there could be no chance of his escaping; it being added that it might be well to look after his wounds, it having been decided that he should be taken to Durango on the morrow, there to be tried on the charge of aiding a prisoner to escape.

There was a curious look on the old man's face as he listened to this tirade, yet he only bowed, and then, requesting the officer to follow him, led the way up two flights of stairs, to a room situated at the end of a narrow corridor, so narrow that two persons could not pass, and built of stone.

Throwing open the door, after unfastening a huge bar that held it, being let into iron-shod sockets sunk in the masonry, he invited the officer to enter, which he did, and holding the lamp that he carried high over his head, he looked around.

The room, or rather cell, in which he found himself was perhaps seven feet long by four wide, and there was no opening for light or ventilation besides the door save a narrow slit in the wall, twelve or fifteen feet from the floor. In one corner stood an iron bed, the sole piece of furniture the room possessed, and this so old, so rusty, it seemed as if about to fall to pieces.

Unless a man should be able to change himself into a swallow, and fly out of the narrow aperture above, he could never hope to escape from this prison, the door once barred.

"Excellent," said the officer, and passing out of the room, he followed his host to the lower hall, where the officers had all rejoined those who had guarded Raphael while the host was absent, and who now left the watch to others.

Raphael was in much need of a little attention, but too proud to ask for it, and remained standing, still bound hand and foot, awaiting what time would bring about; but was getting a little impatient, when the door at the end of the hall burst open, and a young girl, "as lovely almost," thought Raphael, "as Donna Pachucha," burst into the hall, and stood confused in the presence of all these men whom she had not expected to see.

But in a moment her eyes fell on Raphael, who was nearly fainting, and in an instant she was beside him, had cut his bonds, had brought him a chair and a glass of wine, while, her eyes flashing, she gazed angrily around as though asking who had wrought such cruelty on a helpless, wounded man.

And the curs who stood about slunk away in shame, not daring to meet her magnificent eyes, which showered such looks of disdain on the cowards.

Raphael was soon by her influence well cared for, his wounds attended to, and a hearty meal set before him, to which he did ample justice, an officer guarding him on each side during all this time, so afraid were they of their prisoner.

Not a word was exchanged between the young girl and him during the entire evening, but he recollected that he had heard of the fact that her mother had been an American woman, who had met her father in New Orleans, married him there, and died while Ange was yet a child, foully murdered by a Louisiana Creole, whom she had jilted for De Piebracque.

Since then the chevalier had held all Americans in detestation, and was only too glad to see one of the hated race in the power of his countrymen, with a good chance of being shot within forty-eight hours.

But as he noticed the interest that his daughter took in the handsome young stranger American, his bitterness turned to murderous hate; and after the officers had assembled after supper, he proposed a plan to them of getting rid of their prisoner forever, with no danger of discovery.

And they—to their eternal shame, be it said—after some slight demur consented, and took a solemn oath never to reveal to mortal man anything that might occur during their stay in the manor, and never to mention Raphael's name to any one whatsoever.

And a short time later, Raphael was conducted to the cell before mentioned, a short piece of candle given him, the door slammed, the bar was placed in its socket, the enormous lock shot into place, and with the key in his pocket the officer in command retired to his room to sleep, if he could, and quiet settled down over the mansion.

Mademoiselle Ange was confined in her room, which could only be reached by passing through her father's, who had bolted the door of communication on his side.

And as Raphael looked at the stone walls of his cell he realized that all chance of escape was impossible, and throwing himself on the bed, watched the expiring candle, which at length sputtered out, leaving a sickly smell.

Raphael was in pitch darkness.

CHAPTER X. A TERRIBLE FATE.

THE lad was absolutely helpless, for all of his weapons had been taken from him, and in case any attempt was made on his life, he could not defend himself for a moment; and he realized that, after the havoc he had wrought among their ranks, his captors were bitter against him and would not rest until they had his life.

These thoughts kept him wide awake, fatigued as he was, and he lay listening intently for any signs of attack, when suddenly he heard a slight creaking sound, and at the same moment the bed on which he was lying seemed to tremble and shake, and he tried to leap to the floor.

But before he could carry out his thought, he felt that he was held by some mysterious force, and that clamps of iron, heretofore invisible, grasped and held him fast, in the position in which he was lying, as firmly as though bound by a thousand cords.

It almost seemed as if fingers of steel, set in motion by some invisible hand, had garroted and held him in their cruel grip, while at the same moment the bed was shaken still more violently, and Raphael, who struggled in vain to release himself, realized that an abyss had opened beneath him, and that the bed was slowly but surely descending into the depths of some mysterious gulf.

This inexplicable movement continued for ten minutes at least, during which the lad, knowing full well that such action would be useless, did not utter a single cry for help, but lay silently awaiting the result, whatever it might be.

Once or twice, however, he renewed his efforts to free himself, not knowing what new danger might confront him when the bed should cease its descent, but he could not stir, so tightly did the iron arms which held him, clasp him about.

At length the motion ceased, and the bed seemed to rest, for a second time, upon a foundation of some sort, while a noise was heard overhead, which was as the opening of a sealed book to Raphael.

Shuddering, he recalled a tradition that he had heard relating to the De Piebracque mansion, which

he had put down as pure fiction, but which he knew now to be startling truth.

According to this supposed fable, there was a room in the building known as the "Vault," which the owner had ordered built just after the murder of his wife, and in which room was placed a bed, resting on a trap, which opened in the middle.

After his wife's death, and after the room was completed, the chevalier had disappeared for a time, accompanied by two of his most faithful servants, and when they returned, they brought with them, a prisoner, Jean Carcelle, the homicide who had wrecked the happiness of the chevalier's life.

He was given to eat of food and to drink of wine that had been drugged with a powerful soporific, and when sound asleep was placed in the bed in the "Vault," and a strict watch kept over him until his consciousness returned; but while he was yet powerless to exercise any of his physical faculties.

Then the hidden machinery was put in motion, the springs hidden in the bed acted, sprung out and seized the occupant of the bed, the trap opened, the bed passed through the floor and descended to the bottom of a dungeon dug deep down in the earth.

Then the trap closed, and the Creole found himself a prisoner without the slightest chance of escape; while every day was lowered from above, and in full sight of his famishing eyes, a table loaded with all the tempting articles of food and drink a devilish ingenuity could suggest—but always out of reach, until finally the unhappy prisoner expiated his crime, and partially satiated the vengeance of his jailer by dying of starvation and thirst!

The noise that Raphael had heard overhead was caused by the closing of the trap and at the same time the springs which held him flew back and left him at liberty.

He leaped from the bed, and his feet touched a floor damp and slippery with moisture, while, extending his hands, he felt on all sides a wall of cold stone, smooth and polished; it was evident that he was in the famous dungeon of tradition, and this fact became quickly certain, as crawling carefully on hands and knees taking care to avoid any hidden pitfall that might yawn for him, he encountered a mass of something lying in one corner from which he recoiled in horror; his fingers had encountered the cavernous jaws of a skull!

It was a horrible companion in a horrible place, but in a moment Raphael had recovered his nerve and, regaining his bed, seated himself and began to consider the matter calmly, and as he was a lad of much good sense and possessed of any amount of courage he decided that the best thing he could do would be to sleep awhile, as he needed the repose badly, and in a moment more he was sleeping as peacefully as a child.

His sleep lasted for some time, well into the morning, in fact, for when he awoke, a ray of light was stealing into the dungeon far overhead, it entered through a ventilator pierced in the wall high up—it was not part of the intention of the cruel Chevalier De Piebracque to shut out light and air from his Creole prisoner, he only deprived him of food, drink and liberty!

But by means of the light thus afforded, Raphael was able to examine his prison in detail. It was a sort of oval well, the depth of which was at least thirty or forty feet, the walls of which were of hewn stone joined by cement of equal hardness.

The bed, which had been let down from above by chains, rested on the bottom of this well, and vertically over his head, Raphael could distinguish the trap and its ingenious mechanism, and just below this the ventilator was pierced.

One glance around convinced the boy that all efforts to escape would be futile as the well in which he was confined was a veritable dungeon the only means of entering which was the trap, for the smooth, cemented stone walls showed no trace of any other entrance.

In order to leave this dungeon, the chains would have to descend, and grasp the bed with the hooks at the end, the trap open and the mechanism put in motion to raise the whole to the room above whence it had descended.

His examination ended, Raphael soliloquized: "As they took so much pains to imprison me here, it is evident that they do not intend to kill me—they could have done that with less trouble; they could have chucked me in here if they had wanted to, and there would have been no water to receive me as at Mount Desert."

But the hours rolled on and Raphael heard not a sound, and had for his sole companion the grim skeleton of the former occupant of the dungeon, which grinned and glared at him from its fleshless skull.

And finally the light grew fainter as the day waned, and as the boy realized that night was setting in, he felt a sensation of hunger and recollected that he had eaten nothing for well-nigh twenty-four hours.

And he recollected the fate of the Creole, the white bones of whom shone in the corner, and a feeling of something like terror as it is thought grew in his mind that perhaps he too had been placed here to die a lingering death from starvation!

And finally the light died away altogether and plunged in an Egyptian darkness. Raphael tossed about on his bed, in an agony of unrest, cause by the unconquerable thought that he was doomed to a horrible fate!

And the hours rolled on until finally, worn out by mental suffering, the boy fell into a broken slumber,

which was full of dreams that were worse than the reality.

Suddenly he leaped from the bed and, staggering, listened, with every sense on the alert, every nerve quivering with suppressed emotion, and again he heard the muffled sound which had startled him from his dreams; a sound which seemed to come from the bowels of the earth, and seemed to resemble that caused by a pick-ax striking into the earth.

Throwing himself on the slippery bottom of the well, he glued his ear to the earth and listened intently.

The noise seemed to draw nearer, and at the same moment he noticed a slight upheaval of the earth, and as he arose and leaned against the side of the well the dirt crumbled away as if an opening had been made beneath, and Raphael, sliding into the hole, fell into the arms of Rob Stanhope, while near by was Jack Swift, the latter holding a dark lantern.

In a moment they were outside, for the entrance had been effected by piercing the slope of the hill which formed this side of the park, and which was so abrupt at this point as to be almost a bluff, and it had taken but a few hours' work to penetrate beneath the dungeon, the distance and direction being known.

A few words of explanation were sufficient, given as the three were riding away at full speed on the horses the boys had brought. It appeared that Rob and Jack had, after the fight in the forest, ridden for Mount Desert, and it was not until they had traveled for some distance that they perceived that Raphael was not following them.

They stopped and would have returned to his assistance had they not realized what folly it would be to try and rescue him, unarmed as they were, besides being nearly exhausted.

So they continued on toward Mount Desert, there to rest and arm themselves, and attack the Frenchmen as they returned to Durango with their prisoner.

But the soldiers did not appear, although they learned that the officers had frightened the old Mexican woman into telling them what direction Raphael had taken after leaving the castle, which accounted for the soldiers overtaking them so soon.

Anxious as they were about Raphael, and keeping watch through the night, they heard, toward morning, the rapid gallop of an advancing horse, and soon he came into view, bearing a female rider who, Rob swore, was the loveliest creature that ever Mexican sun shone on.

In a few words Mlle. Ange (for it was she), explained what had happened, and that her love for her mother's countrymen would not allow her to remain quiet, even though she thus became a witness against her father, so, lowering herself from her window, and securing a horse, she had ridden to Mount Desert, to try and find some of his friends, and warn them.

She had heard the creaking of the chains as the bed was lowered into the dungeon, and, knowing its terrible secret, realized fully what Raphael's fate would be, and determined to save him if she could.

Giving the boys full directions how to proceed, and advising them to wait another night, she departed, taking, it seemed to Raphael, Rob's heart with her.

The boys remained concealed all day, during which the officers arrived and, not finding them, threatened to burn the building; but realizing that it would be useful as a garrison, changed their minds and rode off to Durango.

At nightfall the boys had set out, and found on arriving that the task they had to perform was not so very difficult, the earth being soft and easy to penetrate, so that they soon succeeded in finishing their work and rescuing their leader.

And as they rode on Raphael related his experiences to them, and vowed such reprisal upon his executioners as would forever wipe out this cruel insult, while he added that the Chevalier De Piebracque, whom he believed insane, should be pardoned his connection with the plot on account of his daughter, the gentle Mademoiselle Ange.

It was not a very long ride to the hacienda where Juarez had taken shelter, although they were not exactly informed as to its location; but he galloped on until a safe distance from the Mansion Piebracque, and then drawing rein, allowed their panting horses to proceed at a walk.

And then they spoke of their comrades who had fallen fighting so gallantly, and whom they would never see more, and they could but wonder whose turn would come next of the three that were left.

But suddenly a human form darted in front of their horses, and as they drew their weapons—Raphael having been provided with arms brought by his friends—the stranger spoke a few words in Spanish, informing them that Juarez awaited *los Americanos* near by, and if the seniors would follow him they would soon meet him.

He was a peon of Durango, who was now working for Don Jose, the friend of the Mexican general, and having often seen Raphael in the village, had been sent to conduct the boys to his employer's house.

The long, low, white building was soon reached, and in a moment more they were shaking hands with Juarez and his host, who had not retired, so anxious had they become concerning the safety of the boys.

They were all soon seated at table and enjoying a bountiful meal, while Juarez was made acquainted with the events that had transpired since they had separated, the narrative being interrupted more than once by sibilant and deep-sounding Mexican expletives.

But they all were sorely in need of rest, and the house soon became quiet, as one by one the lights disappeared, and the inmates retired for the night.

They were rudely awakened not long after day-break by the barking of dogs, the calls of peons, the clashing of steel and the neighing of horses; and, hurriedly throwing on a few articles of clothing and grasping the nearest weapon, the two Mexicans descended to the front hall, where they found that the Americans had preceded them.

Through the iron grating that formed the central portion of the door an armed body of a dozen horsemen was visible.

CHAPTER XI.

A DUEL IN THE DARK.

For a moment Don Jose hesitated, not knowing exactly what course to pursue, but was just about to give order to his retainers, looking toward the defense of the building, when Raphael, who had advanced close to the grating, suddenly slipped bolt and bar, and springing outside, cried out: "They are friends!" and in a moment was among the newcomers, and shaking them by the hands.

After greeting them he returned to the one who seemed to be the leader, and requesting him to dismount, invited him to enter and be presented to the Mexicans.

He was introduced by Raphael as Tom Warner, who, with a half-dozen of Americans, was on the way to visit Raphael at his home, fulfilling an invitation extended the year before.

A few words made the new-comers acquainted with the situation, and after they had partaken of some refreshments, a consultation was held which resulted in it being agreed that the whole party should mount and ride away to Mount Desert, and if the house was found to be occupied by the soldiers a formal demand for its surrender should be made.

This being denied, they would see whether they could not enter, despite permission, and if hostilities ensued—well, they were willing.

So the little band was soon on its way to Mount Desert, Juarez and Don Jose accompanying the Americans, and riding along as gayly as any of the boys.

The wound that disabled Jack Swift's right arm had become so painful as to render any movement a torture, so, much against his will he was left behind to be nursed by Donna Pachucha, who promised to take excellent care of him.

Arrived in sight of the park, it was immediately discovered that the soldiers were in possession, for a sentry was pacing up and down in front of the gate—or the opening where the gate had stood—and at sight of the riders, threw his piece to a ready and awaited their approach.

But he was not long left in doubt as to their intentions, for, separating from his companions and riding forward waving a white handkerchief, Rob approached the sentinel and demanded to speak with the officer in command.

The latter, who was not long in appearing, declined summarily to listen to any propositions relating to the surrender of the castle, and, being warned that an attack would immediately follow, retired to the interior of the house, followed by his sentry, and closed the door.

At the same moment Raphael and his companions, waved on by Rob, came galloping up, and before the soldiers had taken up their stations at the window, were so close to the house, under the heavy overhanging archway of the door, that they were entirely protected from any musket-shots from inside.

But one report had been heard as a shot was fired from the inside, and the whizzing ball, striking Raphael's steel cap, whirled off harmlessly through the air.

Raphael, armed with an ax, brought in case of such need as now arose, attacked the front door so vigorously that at every blow the splinters flew and the wood gave signs of succumbing to his vigorous blows, in a few moments more.

But suddenly there was a brilliant flash, a sharp report mingled with the echoing blows on the door and a ball, fired from a musket thrust through a side window, struck one of the new arrivals full in the breast, killing him instantly.

But another flash, another report followed the first, for Rob, drawing his revolver, took quick aim and the soldier inside fell dead in his tracks, his gun still smoking in his hands.

And at this moment, the door, flying into a hundred pieces, fell from its hinges and the attacking party, penetrating into the hall, found the soldiers on the staircase, when a bloody combat commenced which soon made the steps slippery with blood.

They fought with knife, with sword, with revolver with bayonet, and it seemed as if from the infernal noise, the cries, the lurid flames which belched from the fire-arms, as if Pandemonium itself had broken loose and that the demons were waging a war of extermination among themselves.

Raphael had received a cut on his forehead which, bleeding furiously, rendered his face a scarlet mask, while the crimson fluid, flowing into his eyes, nearly blinded him, and yet he fought on like a wounded lion.

But the soldiers had the advantage of position, and although the invaders gradually worked their way up the staircase, the others, sheltering themselves behind the doors, and retreating into the upper stories, carried on the combat for some time longer, but finally succumbed to the irresistible attack led by Raphael and Juarez and surrendered.

Mount Desert had fallen into his possession, but at what a price!

Tom Warner was dead, stabbed to the heart by a

bayonet-thrust, while of his comrades, but two remained alive.

Don Jose had fallen just as the fight ended, covered with blood and dying from his wounds; while Juarez and Rob were both in sad case from their hurts.

But the loss on the other side had been even more severe, and the French officer begged of Raphael permission to return to Durango, promising that he would not endeavor to retake Mount Desert, and giving his parole that one of the conditions of their release should be that the garrison at Durango also should respect his home.

To this Raphael readily agreed, and after the officer and his men had aided in disposing of the dead, the soldiers rode off slowly to the village, to have their wounds attended to, while the Americans endeavored to remove all traces of the late slaughter, and attended to their own injuries.

Then Raphael requested the two Americans and Rob to accompany Don Jose to his home, there to see if such care could not be extended to him as might save his life.

Juarez and the lad were to remain at Mount Desert and await their return, on the morrow, confident that the soldiers would not break parole and attack them, and the boys rode off, carefully sustaining Don Jose in an improvised litter, and leaving the Mexican general and his young friend at Mount Desert.

Toward midnight Raphael, sleeping lightly on account of the pain in his head, was suddenly aroused by a noise which seemed to come from the room beneath, and, rising and taking his long hunting knife, proceeded down-stairs to investigate.

Opening the door of the suspected apartment, he could scarce suppress a cry of astonishment at seeing, standing near one of the windows, through which came a few straggling moonbeams, a soldier, probably an officer, wrapped in a large military cloak.

The lad stepped into the room, and saluting the stranger, requested to know his business, which, he added, "must be very urgent that you should call at this time of the night and seek entrance through the window."

"My name, sir, is Schombrun, and my brother"—here he faltered for an instant—"was slain by you or yours; and I have sworn to neither sleep nor eat until I have avenged his death."

"I see that you possess no sword, and rather than have you trouble yourself to go in search of it, I remove mine; and now, sir," he continued, drawing a long, two-edged, pointed dagger, "I am at your service," and stooping, he crouched as if about to spring on Raphael, who, seeing that his adversary was built in the same huge mold as his dead brother, knew that to come in his grasp, would be almost certain death.

But as the lad grasped his knife still more firmly in his hand, and watched his antagonist warily, the moonbeams, which until now had lit up the room, disappeared, hidden, doubtless, by some heavy cloud.

"If you will wait a moment I will bring a lamp, for you see, sir, how dark it has become," hazarded Raphael.

"The flames from our eyes will light us sufficiently," replied the other, curtly.

"Well said!" laughed the boy. "I did not think a beer-guzzling Austrian capable of so much wit;" but as he spoke the Austrian rushed on him, crying, "I will give no quarter and expect none—this is a duel to the death!"

But the lad was agile and supple as a cat, and crouching he leaped silently to one side and stood quiet; while the Austrian who had rushed in the direction of Raphael's voice, dashed up against the wall of the room into which he sunk the point of his dagger, so impetuous was his course.

Raphael, who was crawling on hands and knees at the other end of the apartment, laughed and at the same moment leaped in the direction where the deep breathing of the Austrian sounded, and before he could turn sunk his knife into the officer's left shoulder.

With a suppressed roar of rage and pain commingled the Austrian turned and hurled himself upon his young adversary; but the latter had, meantime, sunk again to the floor, on knees and hands, the result being that the soldier struck wildly with his dagger in the empty air, while his feet struck against Raphael's body.

And instantly, quick as the lightning's flash the lad seized the Austrian's knees, lifted the giant in the air, threw him backward on the floor, placed a knee on his chest, another on the arm that held the dagger, pinning it to the planks and placed the point of his knife at the other's throat.

"By the Great Horn Spoon," laughed the boy, "I believe that I've got you now, my foreign friend!"

"Then kill me," cried the other, half-strangled with rage.

"And why not?—it is my right after your warning—I do not doubt that you would settle me in short order, if our positions were reversed. Yet I am willing to release you, but on one condition: promise that you will not recommence this duel in the dark, and I set you free."

"Never!" cried Schombrun, "and I swear that if you spare my life I will not spare yours!"

"Slightly insane, by my faith," murmured Raphael, pressing the point of his knife a hair's-breadth into the skin of the other's throat. "Drop that dagger!"

But Schombrun, instead of obeying, grasped his weapon yet more tightly, although his arm still remained pinned to the floor and he could make no use of it.

"My dear Herr Schombrun," continued Raphael,

mildly, "remember that in all probability there will be a to-morrow and that then we can settle our little differences with rapier or what you will." And then more sternly, "Again I tell you: drop that dagger!"

"Never!" yelled the Austrian, hoarsely, and with a mighty effort of his mighty frame, he half-raised himself, threw his enemy for an instant off his balance and all but freed himself; but Raphael, alert and watchful, was in a moment in his former position and held his adversary as firmly as before.

Then his voice became grave and sorrowful, and again he endeavored to reason with the Colossus who would surely kill him if released: "For the last time I ask you, Herr Schombrun, will you live and let live?"

"I prefer death from your hands to any other gift, and sure as my name is Schombrun and that I am an Austrian, I will kill you this night," and he made another mighty effort to free himself.

Raphael's strength was rapidly giving out, weakened as he was by the sword-cut in his forehead, and he feared that another effort or two on the part of the robust Austrian would change the present aspect of affairs, when he knew that his own death would follow, for the man was evidently raving mad.

"By my faith," he sighed, "better kill the mad-dog than be bitten!" and raising his hand he said: "If you know a single prayer—"

"May Satan claim and receive your soul!" shrieked the Austrian, as the foam flew from his lips.

Raphael's arm fell, the knife-blade entered the throat of the prostrate man to the handle, and a jet of blood spurting from the gaping wound bathed the lad's face with its warm and crimson flood.

The Austrian struggled for a moment more, then his movements became less nervous, then quieted, a sigh was heard, and the man lay motionless—Schombrun was with his brother!

Raphael arose, drawing his knife from its human scabbard, and stood for a moment like a statue, pensive, his face covered with blood, holding in his hand the weapon which had just opened the gates of eternity to the unfortunate foreigner.

And then murmuring: "Poor fellow; how he loved his brother!" with a sigh left the room, and seeking Juarez, related to him the particulars of the awful struggle that had taken place in the room below, and how, to save his own life from the frenzy of a madman, he had been compelled to take that of the other.

And the moon which had hidden its face rather than witness these scenes of human anger and madness, and strife, stole from behind the cloud, and peeped into the room.

But her beams glittered in a pool of red, red fluid, and the white face alongside became still paler in her rays, so drawing the mantle of the night again before her face, she sailed on to more peaceful scenes.

CHAPTER XII. TREACHERY.

THE next morning, as Juarez and Raphael were enjoying their breakfast, the servant brought a note to the former, which she said had been fetched by a messenger who awaited an answer.

The note contained the words:

"I have collected much important information, and await your coming to impart it. Follow the bearer of this and he will conduct you to where I am. You can depend on his fidelity. INEZ."

A few words to Raphael explained matters, Inez being a Mexican girl who was of great assistance to the Mexicans, collecting much information from various sources, and acting as a spy.

Raphael suggested that it might be wise for him to accompany the general at least as far as the door of the house where Inez was, for fear of treachery, when two swords would be better than one.

This was agreed to, and the two, mounting, rode off after the guide, a youth of twenty-two years, who was as idiotic as ignorance, stupidity and superstition could make him.

A rapid ride of a couple of hours brought them to a little village where a dozen houses comprised the entire place, and up to the most pretentious of which the guide rode, and descending, rapped on the door of the yard.

Entrance being had, Juarez was soon ushered in, and the boy guide returning, requested Raphael to proceed to an inn a few doors down the same street, there to await the general's coming, which could not be long deferred.

Entering, Raphael found himself in a long, low room, with whitewashed walls and ceiling, with benches and tables for the benefit of customers. The room was empty save for one sole occupant, who with large sombrero and voluminous cloak, had the air of being a well-to-do Mexican, who was resting during the heat of the day.

Raphael saluted him courteously, which salute was returned, and the American, calling the inn keeper, who was engaged outside, ordered a small bottle of the light wine of the country, and invited the Mexican to join him in a glass, which invitation was accepted.

The two conversed for some time, until at length, Raphael, becoming somewhat uneasy at the long-continued absence of Juarez, made his excuses, and was about to leave the room, when the supposed Mexican, somewhat peremptorily, insisted on his taking another bottle of wine before he withdrew.

Raphael declined, the stranger insisted, until finally, the latter, rising from his seat, exposed the scabbard of a sword, and placing himself in front of the

door, vowed that the American should not leave so unsocially, drawing his long Damascus blade as he spoke.

Raphael saw that he had fallen into a trap, and that if he wished to leave the room, it would be necessary to dispose of his adversary before doing so.

And pass he would, for the trap certainly included Juarez, his friend, the savior of his life, and the father of Pachucha, the latter position being by far the most important.

The combat lasted but a moment; Raphael thrust, the blow was parried, when the boy lunged out with full force, the Mexican leaped to one side, and the blade of the American's sword, piercing the door, stuck fast there, leaving Raphael disarmed and completely at the Mexican's mercy.

In an instant the latter's sword was at the lad's breast, and he was ordered to leave his sword where it was, and seat himself at the table whence he had just risen.

There being no recourse, Raphael acquiesced, and the two were soon seated clinking their glasses—which had been freshly filled by the stranger, who, going into the cellar, the steps of which descended from the room where they sat, had brought up two more bottles, before their trouble.

These were soon emptied, for Raphael carelessly upset them both before they were half-empty, and apologizing, offered to get more if the Mexican would tell him in what part of the cellar the bin was.

The stranger, still between Raphael and the door, and holding his naked sword, agreed, and the lad, raising the trap, descended into the cellar, which, having no other outlet, offered no means of escape.

In a few moments the boy reappeared, but instead of having two or three bottles under his arm, as might have been expected, he carried an immense crock, which required the use of both hands.

"Santissima Maria!" cried the Mexican. "Do you expect to drink all that?"

"Doubtless," returned Raphael, and passing around the table so as to be beyond the other's sword, instead of placing the crock on the table, the lad, quick as a flash, raised it and, drawing back, dashed the contents in the other's face, and the Mexican, suffocated, strangled, blinded, uttered a harsh cry and let his sword fall to the floor.

Instantly, like a cat on a mouse, Raphael sprung over the table, placed his foot on the sword, seized the Mexican about the neck with both hands, and, half-strangling him, threw him back on the floor, fainting.

All this was done so rapidly that the stranger had no time to defend himself, or even to comprehend; and Raphael, gagging him with his handkerchief and tying him with his sword-belt, rolled him into a dark corner under a table, and left him there, carrying with him the stranger's sword as a prize.

The noise of the struggle had attracted no one, and Raphael regained the street without being seen.

In the mean time Juarez, following the directions given by their guide, had proceeded down a rather long corridor, and, arrived at the end, knocked on the door, when a soft, melodious voice bade him enter.

Opening the door, the general found himself in the presence of a dark-eyed Mexican beauty, who, smoking a cigarette, half-sitting, half-reclining on a sofa, had assumed a position of most luxurious ease.

Their greeting was cordial and their conversation of long duration, the general asking many questions and receiving prompt and specific answers, until at length, as darkness came on, the Mexican lighting a small lamp deftly prepared a cup of chocolate and offered it to Juarez.

He, nothing loth, accepted it; but had hardly swallowed the contents of the cup when he felt a sudden heaviness steal over his eyelids and a torpor or eping through his veins which deadened his limbs and made them as weighty as lead.

In a few moments more he had fallen over on the sofa, where he had been sitting and lay, buried in a profound slumber—Juarez had succumbed to a narcotic and was powerless to defend himself.

But the fair cause of his sudden slumber, casting a hurried look about the room and then, leaving it, locked the door, and placing the key in her pocket, was soon out of the house and far down the street.

In another room of the same house seated over a large bottle of *pulque*—that vile Mexican intoxicant—sat the guide who had led Juarez into the trap, conversing with a man somewhat older than he, of a most villainous aspect.

From time to time the younger of the two arose, went to the wall, where hung a daub representing some local saint, and applying his eye to a hole pierced just below the frame, gazed with interest at something that was passing near by.

At length, after one of these periodical visits, he turned to his comrade with a motion of intelligence, and the two, the younger armed with a cruel looking knife, the other drawing a long rapier, stepped on tip-toe to the side of the room, and, pulling on the frame of the picture it slid down, silently, leaving an opening amply large to give them passage.

Through this opening could be seen General Juarez, sleeping heavily, overcome by the drug, and the two assassins, leaping lightly through the opening, advanced upon the defenseless man with up-raised weapons.

It took Raphael but a few moments to traverse the short distance which lay between the inn and the house into which Juarez had entered, and arrived at the latter he tried the door.

It was fast, and not wishing to arouse suspicion

by knocking, he looked about for some other means of entrance, making a complete circuit of the house in his search.

The rear of the building gave upon a garden, the wall of which was broken on the coping here and there, and he found no difficulty in scaling it and leaping into the garden, which stretched for some distance in all directions.

Once safely landed inside he immediately saw that the whole house was dark, with the exception of one window, which was on the first floor, and through which a light shone dimly.

Arrived near it, and hearing no sound, he quieted his steps and listened attentively, but as the silence continued he stepped to the window and looked in.

Lying on a sofa, perfectly motionless, he saw Juarez, and seeing also the apparatus for manufacturing chocolate on a side table, he feared, for a moment, that the Mexican had been poisoned.

But at the same moment he saw a portion of the opposite wall sink down, while in the opening thus made appeared two sinister figures, wear on in hand, and leaping up onto the sill of the window he broke it in with his foot.

As the young assassin advanced on the sleeping man, Raphael leaped into the room, stunning the traitor like a clap of thunder, and he stopped in his tracks.

Raphael had sunk his sword up to the hilt in his breast, crying: "Ah, villain, I am in time!" and the would-be assassin fell to the floor, writhing in agony and vomiting a flood of bloody foam; but neither the cry he uttered nor the noise of his fall awakened Juarez.

But Raphael was not yet free from danger, for the second of the two men, who was a little behind, advanced on the American, waving his sword and, arrived within reach, attacking the lad vigorously.

He was disguised as a common laborer, but from the way in which he rolled up his coat-cuffs, and from the manner in which he placed himself on guard, Raphael could easily perceive that he was thoroughly familiar with the weapon.

The two crossed their weapons and a combat began, which for a few moments left the result a matter of doubt, each of the two fencing with fury, endeavoring to creep under the other's guard and plant a couple of inches of steel in his breast.

At length the gliding point of Raphael's sword slid over the opposing steel and wounded the false peasant in the shoulder, but so lightly that no advantage was gained; yet it angered the man, and drawing a dagger, stepping back and bounding like a tiger, he slipped under Raphael's sword and aimed a blow at his side.

But Raphael was not to die on that day.

The sword-belt that he had taken from the man he had overcome at the inn was embellished with a large brass buckle, and the point of the dagger striking this slipped, and did no damage except slightly tearing his coat.

At the same moment Raphael, repeating the blow that had so well served him on the day the story opens, swung his shortened rapier high in the air and brought the hilt down with crushing force on the other's head; and as the other fell to the floor he placed one foot on his chest, while the point of his sword threatened his throat.

Then glancing at the prostrate man and at Juarez, still sleeping, he reflected:

"This man probably has accomplices, who will come to his assistance in a few minutes. I have neither time to make terms nor to parole him or bind him. A traitor's tool and an assassin, he deserves nothing but death. It is a cruel thing to kill a man, but he is a venomous serpent who may sting me later—"

And Raphael, pressing still harder with his foot, leaned on his sword, and the man had not even time to call out before the weapon entered his throat; he struggled a moment, shivered with one or two terrible convulsions, then quieted, stiffened, and lay still.

Then Raphael, seeing that both of the assassins were never to be feared again, lifted Juarez onto the window-sill, leaped into the garden, and taking the unconscious man on his shoulders, was soon in the street and on his way to the inn.

His revolver in his hand, he soon had the inn-keeper at his feet and a room prepared; carrying the Mexican to which, he placed him on the bed, and sitting beside him, watched through the night.

The man he had left bound below had loosened the straps which held him and escaped.

CHAPTER XIII. RETRIBUTION.

DON JOSE had gone to his forefathers and his home was deserted by his retainers the only persons there present being Juarez and his daughter, Donna Pachucha, and Raphael, besides the old servant that had been sent for to Mount Desert.

The house was plunged in darkness and silence and nothing about the premises gave any sign of life.

Hidden in the woods not far away were five persons, Donna Inez, the assistant at the attempted assassination of Juarez, and four men, one of whom was her husband, Miguel Vegas, the others being renegade Mexicans and desperadoes.

They had learned that Donna Pachucha was alone at the house, but were unaware that Juarez and Raphael had ridden over that day, not wishing to leave her alone; and the object of Vegas and his party was to abduct Juarez's daughter—believing him dead—and claim a handsome ransom.

Inez was to remain in charge of the horses, while the men, one of whom had possessed himself of a

key to the side door, which gave entrance to stairs leading to the second story, were to enter the house and carry off the defenseless girl.

Miguel preceded the party for a short distance, but was then joined by the most vicious of the set, a one-eyed desperado called Pedro, who was the evil-spirit of Vegas and had won him and Inez from their allegiance to Juarez.

Reaching the door, Pedro, who had at one time been connected with the household of Don Jose, turned to the two members of the party who followed and, taking the key from his pocket, said to them:

"The staircase is narrow and we will only be able to go up one at a time. But if any resistance is to be expected it will not be found inside, but will come from the outside should any passers-by be attracted by the girl's screams."

"Very true," interrupted Vegas, "so remain outside, you two, and do your duty in case of attack, one on each side of the door, pistol and sword in hand," and striking a match he lighted a lantern that he carried.

Then, the door being opened, he began to ascend the stairs, followed by Pedro, both being armed to the teeth, and, arriving at the top of the steps, were relieved to find a second door, to which they had no key, wide open.

And Vegas stepped over the sill of this door, into the corridor beyond, while Pedro, who was following, and was a stair or two below, endeavored to follow him; but at the moment when he was stepping onto the top stair of the staircase, the door was slammed in his face, and he cried out involuntarily, on finding himself thus imprisoned in the staircase.

Vegas, hearing the door shut, and turning, found his lantern extinguished at nearly the same moment by a gust of wind, leading him to think that the same blast had blown the door to, and so called out to Pedro; for, having no key, the door could not be reopened, being furnished with a spring-lock.

Vegas knew that at the end of the corridor where he stood was another door, leading to the main hall, and taking this direction he still hoped to be able to reach the room where Donna Pachucha was sleeping, and carry her off despite this accident which at first seemed to threaten to ruin his plans.

But at that moment he heard a sound at the foot of the stairs he had just ascended, the clicking of swords and one or two pistol shots, mingled with cries and oaths. While he was thus shut in the hall, his companions had been attacked on the outside and he was powerless to aid them.

Rushing to a window he looked out and saw, by the dim light shed by the waning moon, four men, two of whom were stretched on the ground, while the other two were engaging each other with swords, and in these two latter he recognized Pedro and his antagonist of two days before at the inn—Raphael.

And mad with rage he drew his revolver to kill the lad in his tracks, when a sharp blow on his arm sent the weapon flying to the ground below, while a deep voice said, almost in his ear:

"It is our turn now, sir!" and, facing about he saw, by the light of the lamp he held, Juarez, who regarded the traitor with an eye that flashed fire, while his naked sword glistened like that of the Avenging Angel.

In an instant the steel flashed in his face, but that instant had sufficed for him to place himself on guard and the blow was parried.

He knew his sword pretty well, but in the face of the man at whose attempted assassination he had assisted his nerve forsook him and he was as a child in the hands of Juarez.

The rapiers clashed a dozen times, and three times the blood of Vegas flowed, until at length, like the darting tongue of a serpent and with a hiss that sounded like the serpent's, the sword of Juarez flew out and when it was withdrawn it was smoking and red with the blood of the dead man lying at the Mexican general's feet.

And while this was in progress Raphael, in his usual manner, had attacked the two below and before Pedro could reach them had stretched them both on the ground, escaping, by a miracle the pistol-shots aimed at him, and, upon Pedro's arrival, had attacked him so viciously that the Mexican was dead before he could utter a prayer.

Raphael had been wakeful and his window being near the door by which the would-be abductors effected their entrance, had been able to overhear them and, informing Juarez, suggested the slamming of the door that the general might wreak his vengeance on the miserable wretch who had sought his life.

One of the midnight visitors being yet alive, confessed the proximity of Donna Inez, and before she was aware of their approach she was seized by Raphael and Juarez, blindfolded, and secured in one of the rooms of the Don Jose mansion.

She was informed that her husband, Vegas, was also in their power, and promised that she should see him on the morrow, and a few quieting words being said to Donna Pachucha by her father, the lights were again extinguished, and the house, with the exception of the ever-watchful Raphael, sunk to slumber again.

The next morning the party set out from the scene of the preceding night's combat, and, Inez being cautioned that a word from her would result in a dagger being planted between her shoulders on the instant, proceeded to the Chateau De Piebracque, Raphael being disguised as a peon, and his face being stained of so yellow a hue that he was entirely unrecognizable.

Arrived there, Juarez, who was unknown to the chevalier, requested to be allowed to rest during the heat of the day, with his daughter and two servants,

which was readily and courteously granted, and the rest of the party entered, leaving Raphael to lead the horses to the stables in the rear, Juarez ordering him to come to him after he had seen that their animals were provided for.

Inez, as soon as they were alone, again begged that she might see her husband, and was promised that the meeting should take place that night, provided she did not betray the party.

The day passed away, and, as night came on, Donna Pachucha feigned a sudden indisposition, which gave Juarez a pretext to request further hospitality; the old chevalier immediately placing everything he possessed at their disposal and sending Mlle. Ange to attend the sick girl.

At length all was quiet, and Juarez, descending to the stables, took from one corner a sack that Raphael had carried across his saddle, and that might be supposed to contain grain for the horses; and throwing this across his shoulders re-entered the castle.

Before leaving the Don Jose mansion, Juarez had confided to Raphael another of the secrets of the De Piebracque house, which had been confided to him by an old servant of the chevalier.

Pierced deep under one of the towers—sixty feet below the surface of the earth—was a dungeon, the walls of which were of a thickness of five feet, and built of solid stone.

This dungeon was reached by steps, which were eighty-seven in number, the entrance being hidden under the hearth-stone of one of the upper rooms of the tower, which stone was moved by setting in motion certain mechanism concealed in the mantle.

The entrance proper to the dungeon was closed by an iron door, which was held in its place, when shut, by three spring-bolts; and on any one crossing the sill of this entrance and setting foot on the floor inside, anywhere within three feet of the sill, the door lifted on its hinges and swung to silently, imprisoning whoever was inside as surely as if they were buried a thousand feet beneath an avalanche.

At midnight, which rolled from the huge bell in one of the loftiest towers, Raphael, followed by Inez, proceeded to the tower chamber, wherein was concealed the mysterious staircase.

Arrived in front of the chimney the boy soon found the ornament which, being pressed, released the hearth-stone, and this slid quietly and smoothly underneath the fire-place, disclosing the first half-dozen of the steps of the descending staircase, visible in the light of the lamp which Raphael held high over his head.

Far below glimmered, like a glow-worm in the distance, a faint spark, and pointing to it the boy said:

"Donna Inez, you will find your husband there!" and thinking no ill the Mexican, stooping, began the long descent, while the boy, lamp in hand, waited.

The descending footsteps grew fainter and fainter, the spark below disappeared as her body intercepted the view, until finally a faint cry of joy came from the depths as she caught sight of Vegas lying there, apparently asleep—"Miguel!" and then came the sullen, hollow clang of the iron door, as it swung to and imprisoned her with her dead husband.

A thrill of horror ran through Raphael's frame, as if the noise below had found an echoing chord in his body; but as she was a traitor and an assassin in will, if not in deed, he hoped that the lesson would be a salutary one and prove of benefit to her after her release.

Food and drink sufficient for her present needs were there in abundance, so that her sufferings would be mental and not physical; and Raphael, reclosing the hearthstone, started to return to his room.

He wore no hat, and the yellow stain was removed from his face, while he was in no manner disguised, for all necessity for concealment was past, as they were to leave the next day, and he was perfectly willing and even anxious that the father of Mlle. Ange should know that his last victim was alive.

The corridor which he was following was dark and cold, and his footsteps sounded hollow, as if he were walking over a grave, while the lamp he carried shed but a dim light, barely disturbing the shadows about him; while he was so pale from recent loss of blood, want of sleep and the recent excitement that he had just undergone, that he looked like nothing so much as a walking ghost.

As he turned a sharp corner and entered into the main hall, he came face to face with the Chevalier De Piebracque, who, unable to sleep, was wandering about like some uneasy spirit whose remorse for deeds of evil prevents repose.

At the sight of Raphael, whom he thought deep buried beside the murderer of his wife, the chevalier uttered a cry, while his hair fairly rose from his head, his teeth chattered, his knees shook, and an icy sweat stood in beads on his forehead.

Then he stepped back into a short passage that seemed to lead nowhere, for at the opposite extremity was nothing but the dead wall; and while Raphael, not imagining that the chevalier supposed him dead, gazed at him in astonishment, the unfortunate De Piebracque, taking still another step to the rear, with a wild cry threw up his hands and disappeared.

One of the stones with which the hall was paved had turned on its center and precipitated the chevalier into one of those horrible pits dug to receive any unfortunate whom it might be desirable to dispose of, and from its yawning depths arose the sound of a body crashing into this unknown abyss.

For a moment Raphael stood, stunned by this awful calamity of which he had been the indirect au-

thor, and proceeding cautiously to the edge of the pit, looked down, turning the stone, which had settled back into its former position, as he knelt, with one hand, while he held the lamp with the other.

But the feeble ray could not penetrate the hundredth part of this awful chasm, and all was still below, not the slightest sound arising that could show that death had been aught but instantaneous.

And the lad, knowing that nothing could be done to in any manner aid the poor chevalier, returned slowly to his room, without disturbing any one, reflecting how strange it was that he who had fallen victim to De Piebracque's wrath should unwittingly be the cause of his death.

His bad news would keep until the morrow, and in the mean time he would let the poor orphan girl, so lately and suddenly bereft of her sole earthly protector, sleep on, this night at least, in happy unconsciousness of this sad blow.

And glad he was the next day that he had deferred the news, for the grief of the girl was something terrible, gently as the tale was told to her by Juarez, and kindly as he soothed her.

By his advice the fact that Raphael had been indirectly concerned was withheld from her as from all, for although he was perfectly innocent, still she might look upon him as the murderer of her father; and his death was explained by the fact of his cane being found lying alongside the balanced stone, and her knowledge of his nocturnal wanderings.

But a long rope was procured and Raphael was let down to the bottom of this tremendous pit, bearing a lantern, and there, on the bottom, pierced in a dozen places by the iron teeth placed below to receive the victims, he found the cold body of De Piebracque, and taking it gently in his arms, was raised to the surface, and that afternoon the old Frenchman was given burial in the graveyard of the chateau, beside his dearly-beloved American wife.

And Mlle. Ange remained, alone, heiress of his immense estate.

CHAPTER XIV.

BURIED ALIVE!

THIS unexpected death of the old chevalier caused Juarez and Raphael to postpone their departure, for they could not think of leaving Ange De Piebracque alone in her distress and in a house without a companion.

They decided to remain for three or four days at least, and Juarez suggested that Raphael ride over to the castle and inform the boys of the reason of their absence and request them to remain where they were for a few days and await their coming.

Shortly after dusk the boy returned, and as he approached the chateau through the wood, and hidden by the shadows of the trees, he was surprised to hear voices of men talking loudly, and immediately dismounting, fastened his horse deeper in the forest and then, taking advantage of every inequality of the ground, every bush and tree, crept close to the band of strangers.

After a few moments of listening he discovered that it was a party of officers—among whom were some of those who had borne him a prisoner to this same chateau a short time before and condemned him to a cruel death.

He recognized the voice of the young lieutenant who had so openly expressed his admiration for Mlle. Ange, and who had conducted the party to the chateau.

And in a few more words he learned that there was a traitor in the household, in the person of Mlle. Ange's maid, who had been bought over by young De Villeneuve, as the lieutenant was named, and between them they had a ranged a plan by which the young girl was to be abducted.

He was to come with his friends and so couch his demand for admission as to arouse the ire of the old chevalier, and thus be refused entrance, and while the others kept on reiterating the demand De Villeneuve was to steal to the rear of the chateau, where a rope would be swinging from one of the upper windows, by which he was to gain entrance and carry off Ange while she was under the influence of a narcotic, administered by Chiquita, her maid.

In a moment Raphael had stolen away, and, making a considerable detour, arrived at the designated point before the lieutenant, and there, swinging along the wall, he could distinguish a dark line, which he knew must be the rope that had been mentioned.

Knowing, as he did, that Ange had kept the seclusion of her room and had her meals sent thither, he saw how easily the plot matured by the officer and the maid, could be put into execution, and he started to climb the rope.

But a moment's reflection convinced him that such a course would be unwise, as he might not reach the window before the arrival of the officer, and would thus betray the discovery of his plans; so, hiding in the shadow of the wall, he awaited the coming of the other.

Far above him was a window in which a light was burning, and as he watched it, the sash was opened and a figure, leaning out, took the cord and shook it as if to be assured of its solidity, and, apparently satisfied, withdrew, leaving the window open.

At the same instant a footstep was heard and the lieutenant, approaching rapidly, seized the cord, when the hilt of Raphael's sword, descending on his head with crushing force, sent him to the turf, stunned as a beef-steer falls to the earth beneath the stroke of the butcher.

And then, seizing the rope, after replacing his sword in the scabbard, he climbed lightly upward, raising his head from time to time and looking at

the light, which still burned steadily above, like a light-house, serving as his beacon.

Suddenly the light was shaded for a moment, and the figure leaned out once more and looked down; but it was so dark that it was impossible to distinguish any one's features and Raphael had no fear, but continued to climb until he was within twenty feet of the window, when the figure disappeared and, a moment afterward the light was extinguished.

This was exactly what Raphael would have wished, and, reaching the stone sill of the window, he climbed in, and, as he stepped to the floor a voice whispered that Mlle. Ange was asleep and that—but at this moment Raphael's hand was placed over her mouth and he seized her so tightly that any effort to escape would have been futile.

It did not take long to secure the trembling girl, who was half-dead with fear, and gagged and helpless, she was thrown into the corner, while Raphael, striking a light, and glancing around, soon discovered Mlle. Ange sleeping quietly in an arm-chair, undisturbed by the noise that he had made on entering and during his struggle with Chiquita.

Fearing that Juarez might betray himself, but trusting to his discretion not to do so, believing that he would send one of the servants to parley with the officers, he hurried in search of the Mexican, whom he soon found and relieved of much anxiety on his own account, Juarez fearing that the boy might have fallen into the hands of the officers.

The servants of the house had not betrayed the presence of strangers within, nor had they mentioned the death of the chevalier; for, at the first rude speech made by the officers, the old door-keeper—a Mexican himself—had slammed the wicket in their faces, and refused to hold further parley with them.

Raphael related his adventure, and assured Juarez that he had so modified his blow as not to kill De Villeneuve, but only stunned him, and that he had so often used this famous stroke of his, that he knew exactly how long a person would remain unconscious.

"We have an hour before us," he added, and then began to consider what had best be done.

The officers numbered twenty or twenty-five, while they were two, there being no dependence to be placed on any of the servants, who were, for the most part, aged and infirm, so that any idea of endeavoring to fight their way out, on account of Pachucha and Inez—Had they been alone!—and the two exchanged a smile which seemed to say: "Ah! that would be different."

"Still," said Raphael, "I will go to the door and see if there is any chance of the officers retiring and allowing us free passage; for, maybe they will abandon their design when they learn that M. De Piebracque is dead," and, sword in hand, he descended the main stair-case, threw open the door, and stepped out in full view of the assembled officers.

Astonished as they were at seeing an armed man thus confronting them, they were more amazed, when, as a vivid flash of lightning rent the black pall of the heavens with a streak of gold, they recognized Rapier Raphael; but before he could utter a word, a dozen revolvers cracked, and as many bullets hurtled by the boy harmlessly, into the hall behind him, and at the same time the officers rushed on him with drawn swords.

"Back! back!" cried Raphael, and falling on them in the midst of the darkness, he distributed a score of sword-cuts and thrusts, right and left, which were followed by yells of rage and cries of pain, proof that he had brought blood from more than one of his adversaries; leaped to the rear, cleared the two or three steps at a bound, closed the door full in their faces, and slid the bolt.

The stout oak door would, he knew, baffle their efforts to effect an entrance for some minutes, as they would have to find tools with which to force it, and he rushed up the main stairway four steps at a time, called on Juarez and Pachucha to follow him, and soon reached the dressing-room of Mlle. Ange, whom he found still sleeping.

Then turning to Pachucha he said: "Donna Pachucha, there is but one road open to us," and he pointed to the window. "Some of your father's bravery must have descended to you—do you dare attempt it?"

"What matters the road," replied the intrepid young girl, "provided it leads to safety?" and she walked to the window with Raphael, who, taking her in his arms stepped on to the window-sill, then, enlacing her with one arm, he clung to the knotted cord with the other, and swung off into space.

Leaning out, breathless, Juarez followed with an anxious eye this human group, confiding its life to a cord fifty feet long, and did not stir until Raphael and his burden, scarce seen through the darkness, reached the ground safe and unhurt.

The young lieutenant still lay motionless on the grass, although the first drops of the threatened storm were beginning to fall, as Raphael turned to Pachucha and thanked her for the courage and coolness she had displayed, which had lightened his task more than half, and told her that he must now leave her alone for a few moments while he returned and succored Ange, fearing that Juarez's age might have weakened his strength, and would prevent his descending the rope with the young girl.

The parting was a short but a sweet one, and once more Raphael climbed the rope and disappeared through the window.

In two words he explained his reappearance to Juarez, who, however, laughed at the idea, and looked at his vigorous limbs and sinewy hand with a certain satisfaction: "On my word of honor, my

dear Raphael," said he, "you are really too grasping; you wish to perform all the gallant deeds yourself!"

Valuable time might have been lost in this discussion; but, a sudden thought striking Raphael, he cried:

"So be it, general. I was the innocent cause of the chevalier's death. By Heavens, I will not be guilty of the murder of Inez! Take Mlle. Ange and escape. I will go and release the Mexican woman," and as the blows still sounded on the door below, he bounded from the room, while Juarez, raising the inanimate form of the sleeping girl, attached her firmly to him with his belt, that he might have the use of both hands, carefully grasped the rope and descended with difficulty.

But as he neared the ground the cord, chafed by the edge of the stone window-sill against which it rubbed, parted, and Juarez and his burden fell heavily but unharmed to the ground, while the useless piece of rope, dropping from above, coiled about him, as it fell, like some enormous serpent.

Donna Pachucha uttered a short cry, which was, however, instantly suppressed, both on account of her father's fall and because of the thought that now there was no means of escape left to her—lover; yes, that was the word, she used in her thoughts.

But in an instant Juarez was on his feet, had loosened the young girl, who still slept on, despite the shock of the fall, and had crossed swords with De Villeneuve, who had returned to sudden consciousness and attacked the Mexican, almost before the latter was aware of his presence.

The contest lasted but a few moments, but they were moments of rage—of fury, although Juarez retained his coolness while the other was blind with anger at seeing his prey escape, and endeavored, by a secret and treacherous thrust, to end the combat; but the stroke was parried, and he received a slight touch in return.

And then his passion became madness, and losing all control of himself he rushed on Juarez, aiming a ferocious stroke; but his sword flew high in the air, while the Mexican's rapier, entering his eye, pierced his brain, and he fell like an uprooted tree, covering the turf with his blood.

Wiping his sword, Juarez replaced it in its scabbard, and lifting the young girl, gently, turned to his daughter and asked her to follow.

"But, father," she pleaded, clasping her hands, "Raphael—" The pause was more eloquent than any words.

"To-morrow, my child, we will endeavor to aid him—to-night nothing can be done. Let us go to Mount Desert where he has stanch friends and there consult. Raphael knows this place thoroughly and will elude all search. Come."

Consoled by this last reflection, the girl followed Juarez to the stables, where they procured their horses, and rode off, undetected, just as the crash of the falling door and the triumphant cries of the officers, who had not thought of De Villeneuve during their excitement, gave evidence that they had at last succeeded in effecting an entrance.

Raphael, heedless of all else but the wretched woman in the vault below, immured with a festering corpse, hurried through the corridors until he reached the room where was concealed the hidden staircase, and, pressing the concealed spring, the steps lay before him.

He descended them three at a bound until he was half-way down, and then, remembering that the officers would search the chateau for him "from turret to foundation stone," he hurriedly retraced his steps and slid the concealing stone nearly back to its place, the interstice being so narrow as to be hardly discernible, and as a precaution against its closing, inserted the blade of his knife in the crack so that the spring might not catch and insume him, perhaps, forever.

Then, being in total darkness—as indeed he had been before, he felt his way carefully down the steep stairway until his outstretched hand struck against the iron door of the dungeon, when, after a few efforts, he found the knob that shot the bolts from their sockets, and turning it, he drew the door wide open.

After the Plutonian darkness in which he, until this moment, had found himself, the light which now shone in his eyes dazzled and almost blinded him, so that, for a few seconds, he could hardly distinguish an object in the vault; but in an instant more his eyes became accustomed to the glare and everything within stood out before him in vivid distinctness.

Lying as it had been left, except that the position of its head had been changed, was stretched the corpse of Vegas, covered with a light shawl that Inez had worn when she first entered the cell, while seated, with finger on lip, as if cautioning the intruder not to disturb the sleeper, was his wife, the dead head of her husband in her lap.

From the expression of her face, from the look in her eyes, Raphael learned at a glance that she was insane—the shock had been too much and her brain had succumbed.

He stepped inside the door, his heart full of pity, taking care to avoid the treacherous stone which acted on the springs of the door, by stepping over it, when she recognized him!

The look in her eyes changed to a baleful glare, as she sprang to her feet like a tigress, and with a hyenaish yell leaped on him with clutching fingers.

The sudden shock threw him back and his foot trod on the perfidious stone, the door clanged to, while, flinging her from him, she fell against the table and overturned the lamp, leaving him in an Egyptian darkness and alone with a madwoman and a corpse!

CHAPTER XV.

TO THE RESCUE.

JUAREZ, Donna Pachucha and Mlle. Ange reached the castle without further adventure, and were warmly received by Rob and his friends, who were, however, unable to restrain their anger when they heard of the attack on the chateau and the accident that had befallen the only means of escape left to Raphael.

They could picture to themselves his disappointment when he returned to the room and, on going to the window, found that the treacherous cord had parted; yet could but exchange congratulations that no injury had resulted from this catastrophe.

The Americans wished to endeavor at once to rescue Raphael, but were dissuaded by the same arguments that had been used by Juarez in inducing Pachucha to leave the chateau, and consented to wait until the following day, when Rob would ride to the chateau and investigate the status of affairs.

He returned from his expedition with no good news, stating that the officers were installed at the chateau and had been reinforced by a company of soldiers, evidently determined to remain there indefinitely and make a permanent barracks of the place.

He had been able to learn nothing of Raphael, but hoped that in this case no news was good news, and that during the day the boy would turn up all right, having unbounded faith in his leader's bravery and strategy.

The sight of Mlle. Ange, who was completely recovered, drove the last remaining cloud from his brow; and looking in her eyes, and passing the hours in talking with the bright girl, the day wore rapidly away to night, and still there was no news of Raphael.

Juarez was on thorns, and could not for a moment remain quiet, pacing up and down and endeavoring, in the deep tangle of his thoughts, to find some plan by which he might aid his young friend; while his daughter was a prey to the keenest anxiety, and was even more restless and worried than her father.

But the day waned: the night came and passed; another day and night came and went, until, on the morning of the third day the girl, unable to endure this terrible suspense any longer, confided to her father a plan she had conceived, and begged his permission to put it into execution.

And this was agreed to; and in pursuance of her idea, one of the boys—Jack Swift, who spoke French like a native—disguised himself in a soldier's uniform and started off toward the chateau, to mingle, if possible, with the garrison, and thus penetrate to the interior; but before leaving he held a long conversation with Mlle. Ange, who repeated to him over and over again sundry directions regarding the workings of some of the mysteries of the chateau, learned from papers she had found in her father's desk after his death.

And as Jack disappeared, many an unspoken prayer went up, asking that he might escape detection and succeed in entering the chateau without exciting suspicion; Pachucha meantime, awaiting the coming of the night with ever-increasing anxiety, while the weary hours dragged their slow length along, as if each one was composed of a cycle of time.

But at length the sun set behind a massed bank of clouds that was piled in the western horizon, and which was ever and anon split by a yellow fork that flashed through its center; while as darkness set in, the thunders rolled in deafening peals, and the hot lightning whizzed through the air in every direction, bathing the landscape in a flood of flame-hued colors.

And as the rain poured down in torrents, Donna Pachucha, clad in the suit of a Mexican *vagaro*, or herdsman, and wrapped in an immense poncho that protected her slight form from the dashing rain, rode out alone from Mount Desert and took the direction of the chateau, her heart beating high with the hope that she might be able to penetrate within the walls and, finding Raphael, succeed in releasing him.

It was an enormous task that she had set herself, yet she had in her slight frame the material that enabled Joan of Arc to rise superior to the weaknesses of her sex, and lead the armies of France where a man might have hesitated to set foot.

As the darkness settled down, and the impenetrable blackness of the heavens seemed to envelop the earth, she entered the forest and allowed her horse to pick its way over the sodden grass, well knowing that the intelligence of the dumb brute would not permit it to go astray, and thus proceeded until the road leading to the chateau was reached, the shadows being less deep here, and enabling her to judge of her whereabouts.

A short distance from the walls of the residence of the late De Piebracque she stopped, and, dismounting, tied her horse by the bridle-rein to a tree which was surrounded with a heavy growth of underbrush, completely hiding him from the observation of any chance passer-by, if indeed any one were abroad on this fearful night.

And then keeping some distance from the chateau, which blazed with light, nearly all of the front windows showing that the rooms were occupied, she cautiously circled until she arrived opposite the tower wherein Raphael had first been confined, and this she rapidly approached.

Climbing with difficulty the steep bank which the boys had pierced in rescuing Raphael, she reached a point half-way up, and here, parting the bushes and crawling in, she found the opening, and lying flat on her face wormed herself inside.

In a few moments, feeling above her as she advanced, she discovered that she had finished the

second stage of her journey, and rising, she lighted a dark-lantern that was hung to her belt, carefully protected from the rain by her *serape*, and looked about her.

The ray of light penetrated every nook and corner of the dungeon, as she turned the bull's-eye in different directions, and in a moment she recognized the locality from Raphael's descriptions.

There was the bed on which he had been so firmly held by the mysterious arms of steel that had so tightly grasped him; far above she could see the trap-door and the chains hanging a few inches below it, like the web woven by some huge insect to infold its victims in its iron links; and *there*—yes, *there*!—and she flashed the light into the corner with a shudder, was that horrible grinning thing, those ivory white bones, those fleshless clutching hands—all that remained of what had once been a man!

She shuddered as she gazed, and for a moment her courage almost forsook her, as she glanced involuntarily over her shoulder, fearing that some ghastly shape might be in the corner, gibing and gibbering at her with its ghostly lineaments, and the silence was so perfect, except the moaning of the winds which found entrance through the cavity at her feet, that she might as well have been in her grave, with her bones crumbling into dust—for aught that differed.

The surroundings, the vault-like odor of the place, the horrible and ghastly visions conjured up by the sight of the skeleton in the corner tended to heighten her fears and render her position almost unbearable and it required the utmost will at her command to nerve her to remain and wait.

But the minutes glided by—it seemed to her that they crawled—until at length a slight creaking overhead—so slight that it would not have been perceptible had it not been for the deathlike stillness that infolded her—attracted her attention, and in an instant all of her fears took flight, and turning the lantern she looked up.

The chains above were descending slowly, link by link, creeping down with an almost indistinguishable progress, until, at length, the hook on the end of one of them clanked against the iron frame-work of the bed, and seizing this she fastened it in the ring on the leg and did the same with the others, and then, fearing the clasping arms concealed in the framework, she leaped on the bed and, standing upright, steadied herself by one of the chains.

A half an hour passed thus and then the bed began slowly to ascend and move toward the trap above—the first part of her plot had succeeded, and Jack, thanks to his disguise, had been able to reach the mechanism and put it in motion.

Slowly and silently it arose until, being nearly at the top, Pachucha crouched fearing to be crushed against the seemingly immovable trap just overhead, and wondering if she were thus destined to die just as she had begun to succeed; but her fears were unfounded, for on nearing the trap, other machinery was evidently put in motion, for the swinging doors fell silently down and gave free passage to the bed, closing beneath it as the feet reached the level of the floor, when all seemed natural and nothing was left to excite suspicion.

The chains were concealed beneath the floor, and the sliding panels attached to the trap closed the holes where the hooks lurked ready to seize the legs when the bed should descend; the steel arms, which at the first tremor of the framework had sprung out, settled back in their places, and all was once more quiet.

Donna Pachucha had closed her lantern; but now, allowing a needle-like ray of light to escape, she looked for the door, hastened to it, and pulling hard, swung it wide open, shutting off the light and listening intently at the same time.

In the corridor—narrow and cold—into which she looked all was quiet, and the hall was deserted; but the sounds of boisterous laughter, snatches of songs and clash of glassware could be heard coming from the rooms in front where the garrison were holding high revel, seated around glowing fires, for the air was damp and chilly.

Then, without hesitating an instant, with tread so light that not one of the slumbering echoes of the chateau was awakened, she passed quickly through the corridor, and entering the larger hall into which it led, followed it to the room where was hidden the secret staircase.

With palpitating heart she felt for the spring, and soon was rewarded by seeing the hearth-stone glide slowly into the space left for it under the fireplace, leaving the staircase open.

As the opening appeared something fell with a clash and a clang as of metal, and went sliding and clattering down the stone steps, stopping at the bottom with a dull thud as it struck the iron door.

It was the sword Raphael had left to prevent the stone from sliding back into its place and shutting him in.

Reckless of all discovery, Pachucha flew, rather than ran, down the steep staircase, and in a moment had reached the door, had found the bolt, and, pulling it back, threw the door open, turned on her dark-lantern to its fullest glare, and standing on the sill looked inside.

Crouching in the corner was Raphael, but so pale, so wan, so haggard, that he was scarcely recognizable, while his unkempt hair, straying over his forehead in wildest disorder, his eyes sparkling with the lurid light which denotes a tottering reason, his trembling hands and bleeding lips showed what untold and unheard of agony he had endured.

Miguel lay as Raphael had found him, while, covered with blood and the picture incarnate of an inmate of Bedlam, Inez, cold in death, was crowded in another corner of the room, or rather dungeon. After her first wild attack on Raphael she had burst

a blood-vessel, and the death-rattle in her throat was the last sound the boy had heard after the table crashed to the ground and the light went out.

Besides the trembling of his hands, the only sign of life that Raphael gave was in his eyes, which flashed in the light of the lantern like two coals of fire brightened by the bellows—for sparks seemed to fly from them and leap into the surrounding darkness.

At first he looked at the streaming glare with the stupefied curiosity, mingled with fear, which is noticed in a wild beast when a human being enters its cage, then suddenly, as Donna Pachucha turned the light full on her own face, the boy uttered a cry—a cry impossible to describe—a cry of mingled savage joy and of a furious madness; then recognizing her completely and realizing that this was no apparition, and raising his hands, clasped together, high above his head, he shrieked:

"It is she! It is Pachucha!" and dragging himself toward her he fell at her feet, to all appearances more dead than alive, while the girl, bending, said: "Raphael, I bring you liberty!" and she cast on him a look of ineffable love and pity.

As the boy threw his weight on the stone the door swung heavily inward, but Pachucha had foreseen this and had prevented its closing by stopping it with her heel, so offering one hand to Raphael, she quickly drew him from the interior of the dungeon, and once outside, shut the door, leaving the dead Mexican and his wife in their grave.

A few mouthfuls of food—she was compelled to give him sparingly, as his hunger was like that of a ravenous wolf—and a swallow or two of brandy soon restored Raphael somewhat, and picking up his sword, the boy was able to follow her up the steps, slowly, it is true, but with considerable more strength than would have been expected a few short moments before.

Arrived at the top the stone was replaced and all resumed its normal condition, while the two silently and cautiously retraced the path followed by Donna Pachucha a short time before, and succeeded in regaining the "Vault," as the room containing the mysterious bed was called, and here they found Jack.

Knowing that it would be impossible to leave the chateau on account of the guards, he had, after waiting for what he thought a sufficient length of time, lowered the bed and left it at the bottom, and then, carefully locking the room where he had found the windlass that worked the apparatus, had proceeded to the "Vault," there to await the return of Pachucha.

A word and a grasp of the hand sufficed, and Jack, with Donna Pachucha clinging to him, descended by means of the chains; for Raphael, in his weak state, had to relinquish all thoughts of looking after any one but himself—and indeed it was difficult for him to reach the bottom in safety.

But at last the three were reunited, and it was not long before they were outside, where the green grass, the waving trees, the fresh air, the stars blinking welcome in the sky—for it had cleared off, and now all was calm and quiet and peaceful—seemed to Raphael the incarnation of Freedom; while the muttering thunder, rolling far in the distance, resembled nothing so much as the sullen complainings of some fleeing giant balked of his prey.

And now Raphael and Pachucha are mounted and have ridden away bonnily to Mount Desert, which seems more like Mount Oasis; while brave Jack Swift has set off hardily to trudge through marsh and through mire until home is reached.

And if any one thinks that, arrived there, Raphael was not cuddled and coddled to his heart's content, and that Juarez and Ange and Rob were never done shaking hands and congratulating, and that Pachucha and Jack were not the heroine and the hero of the hour, then that "any one" is much mistaken, and does not know how often honor is given where honor is due.

But Time works all things, and a few days saw Raphael completely restored and ready to proceed with Juarez and his party to the Mexican camp, there to seek a short respite from the dangers and troubles of the past few days.

CHAPTER XVI.

SELF-SACRIFICE.

THERE were gathered in the main hall of the Castle of Mount Desert, which blossomed like a rose in June, a party of three—Juarez, Donna Pachucha, and Mlle. Ange had, that morning left, on their way to the Mexican camp—Raphael and his two friends—friends until death—Rob and Jack.

The three boys had decided that if any event arose in which their presence would be necessary, it would be best that they should be united, and as many matters had to be arranged before they left Mount Desert, they had decided to remain and allow their three comrades—for the girls were as closely bound to them by the ties of danger as they were to each other—to proceed alone, hoping to overtake them before many miles had passed beneath their horses' feet.

The boys, rapier in hand, stood waiting. The increased knocking on the door, the ever-culminating cries of the crowd beneath, had proved to them that the hour of supreme action had come; that now or never they must prove their bravery or else meet the death that awaited them below.

False to their comrade's oath; false to themselves, the friends of Maurigot, of Schombrun, of De Villeneuve awaited them, forgetting that an oath had been sworn, a promise given, that Mount Desert should be left in peace, that the boy swordsmen who claimed it as their home should be forever exempt from French or Austrian marauders.

The room adjoining the one—or rather the hall in

which the boys were assembled, was a large, square apartment, in which it would have almost been possible to deploy a troop.

And at this moment blows were heard, resounding through the walls of the castle, which resembled nothing so much as chasms wrenched through the rocks of an eternal precipice, while the three boys, forming as by intuition a triangle, each point of which bristled with a sword, awaited the attack which was sure to follow.

The windows, crashing into a thousand pieces, gave passage to a dozen soldiers; but for Raphael and his two friends this was but a mouthful; the twelve privates fell, one after the other, as hens on the roost tumble to the grip of the fox, without having touched a single American.

But Jack had received a thrust from a bayonet, which, disabling him for a moment, still allowed him to fight, sword in hand and revolver in belt; but at this moment reinforcements appeared—reinforcements for the enemy, who, now doubly strong, advanced to attack the Americans.

The latter, crying "Maximilian and France," advanced straight toward the combatants and striking right and left, soon pierced a passage to the spot where Raphael and his friends were awaiting them or any other adversaries.

Still it appeared strange to Raphael that wherever they moved a track of blood was to be seen in their rear; yet at the same moment a more than furious onslaught distracted his mind and he had no attention to divide with any thing else, for the band of new-comers rushed on him like tigers.

And the battle recommenced, terrible, maddening, and without breathing-spell.

Raphael and the leader had crossed their swords, and had succeeded each in administering a wound to the other, but the hurts were light and did not result in either of them being placed in a position whence neither could continue.

The combat lasted for perhaps an hour when Jack, who was fighting side by side with Raphael, saw one of the wounded, who, slightly raising himself, drew his pistol from his belt, and, aiming at his leader, fired.

Jack, already wounded unto death, saw in a moment what was intended, and, loving his friend more than his life, bounded to one side, leaped in front of Raphael and received the ball full in his breast, and he fell, bloody and dying at Raphael's feet, murmuring, "Rivals in love I could not be so in life; Raphael, I have won her gratitude!" and then a name—a name of one loved until death strayed over his lips, and with this name his breath exhausted itself, and he died.

And suddenly Raphael and Rob, panting, bleeding, slipping in the blood which strewed the floor—the blood of enemies, of traitors and of their friend, heard a thundering voice which cried to them and the others:

"Peace, gentlemen! Lower your arms!" and Juarez, at the head of fifty Mexican gentlemen, entered the hall, while the drum-beat below announced the arrival of the army of freedom—the friends of Raphael.

But a few words more.

The reader has recognized in Juarez the famous Mexican general who was afterward President of the Republic. Has recognized in our hero, Raphael, his counselor and adviser throughout all his wars and political troubles.

And is it necessary to relate the fate of the last two surviving members of the Swordsmen of Zacatecas? Is it necessary to describe the nuptials of Raphael and of Pachucha—of Rob? and of Ange? Suffice it to say that they still live, and that he who has thus related his experience to you will once again let you hear from him, and if you have been interested in hearing you have not been more entranced than has been RAPIER RAPHAEL.

THE END.

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